

Transcriptivism: An ethical framework for modern linguistics

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Abstract. Descriptivism is a methodologically efficacious framework in the discipline of linguistics. However, it categorically fails to explicitly account for the moral responsibilities of linguists, as moral agents. In so doing, descriptivism has been used as a justification for indifference to instances and systems of linguistic violence, among other moral shortcomings. Specifically, many guidelines for descriptive ethics stipulate that a linguist “do no harm” but do not necessarily require the linguist to prevent harm or mitigate systems of violence. In this paper, I delineate an ethical framework, transcriptivism, which is distinct from research ethics and covers the line of philosophical inquiry related to questions of the moral agency of linguists and their moral responsibility. The potential for this new framework is demonstrated through a case study of conflicting Tennessee language ideologies regarding gender-neutral pronoun usage as well as an analysis of misgendering as an act of linguistic violence.

Keywords: ethics; LGBTQ+; research; morality; linguistics; philosophy; violence

1. Introduction: Transcriptivism defined. It is an often-overlooked fact that the study of language is traditionally the description of language, or the cataloging thereof. As language is linguistics’ principle object of study, this fact may be at best an unremarkable observation to be found in any introductory linguistics classroom and, at worst, a tautological representation of linguistics as a discipline- to study is to describe, as it were. Historically, the commitment to describe language usage (*descriptivism*) and the contrasting individual or institutional inclination to dictate “proper” language usage (*prescriptivism*) have assumed myriad mutable forms and definitions, settling into somewhat concrete theoretical and epistemological models only recently. This has had the perhaps unintentional effect of marginalizing discipline-specific moral inquiry within the field, wherein such moral inquiries have often been associated with the prescriptive enterprises of the non-linguist. By moral inquiry, I do not mean to say that research ethics have been neglected nor do I mean to mischaracterize linguists as immoral agents within academia. Rather, the question that I intend to entertain here concerns the moralities of finished products and their proliferation in public spaces. Specifically, do linguists have a moral obligation to exercise linguistic expertise on language-related social issues that extend beyond a pure description of how linguistic agents operate? If linguists are moral agents within society and not simply undertaking an academic exercise in truth-making, then it must be said, adamantly and without reservation, that linguistics as a discipline must reconcile the moral responsibility of linguists with its commitment to empirical research. In brief, if descriptivism requires neutrality on moral issues, then the methodology as it stands must be considered immoral. In this paper, I introduce transcriptivism as an ethical framework within which these questions may be approached with the same academic rigor allowed to descriptivist projects, and I further argue

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that its inclusion within the field will allow linguistics to more critically address social issues related to language, including linguistic violence.

First and foremost, it may be of some use to delineate transcriptivism from other lines of ethical inquiry in the field of linguistics, Figure 1 below. Essentially, transcriptivism is a framework within which linguists take moral stances in relation to the object of their research and its academic products. Within this framework, linguists must go beyond *describing* language in order to *transcribe* linguistic knowledge. Specifically, whereas descriptivism and prescriptivism constitute paradigms of linguistic stance, the framework I propose here is concerned with the moral stances that linguists, as language scientists, take in relation to linguistics and its social role beyond the academy. By means of the transitive property, transcriptivism is also concerned with language and language usage, but only through the lens of descriptive practice. Therefore, I am not undertaking an argument against the paradigm of descriptivism, but rather, I structure transcriptive practice as an argument for the moral responsibility of linguists beyond the fundamental concerns of research ethics. Thus, I will not seek to explore the paradigm of prescriptivism (for a detailed account, see Curzan 2009, 2014) nor attitudes toward prescriptive ideologies (Straaijer 2016).

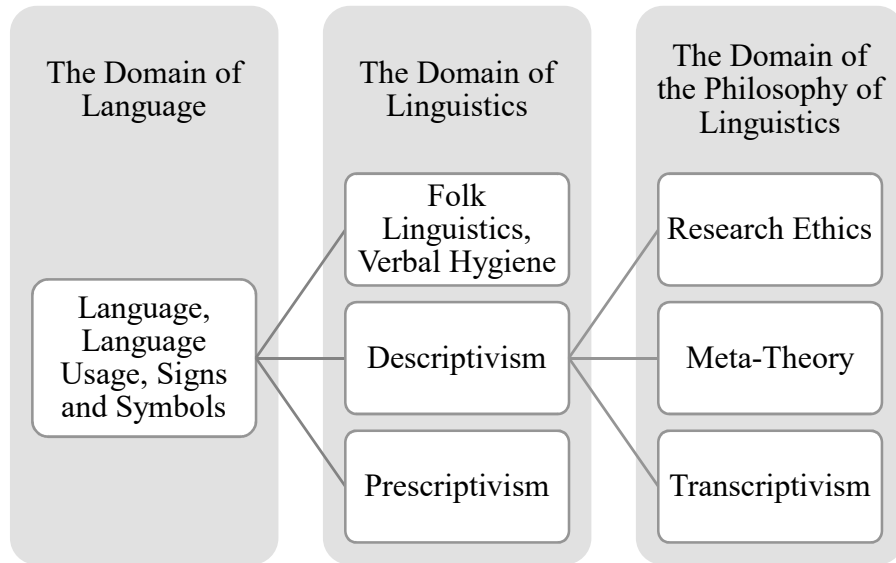


Figure 1. Transcriptivism delineated from other sub-domains

In order to demonstrate the hierarchical relationships stated in figure 1 above, let us explore a simple thought experiment building from Saussure’s (1972) example of the word *arbre*¹. Within the domain of language, the word itself, its referent world-object, and the various attributes of its production (e.g. its phonology, morphology, syntactic distribution, semantics, etc.) exist simply within the linguistic system as a vehicle of communication. As of yet, nothing has been predicated of its fitness as a sign. However, in that humans are social, communicative beings, we are constantly aligning ourselves with language attitudes regarding the production of words: through folk linguistics, individuals may construct theories of the word’s origins or of the word’s production and usage, and regarding Verbal Hygiene (Cameron 1995), they may even perform some level of linguistic maintenance regarding the word’s usage within interpersonal

¹ Although Saussure’s examination of the word *arbre* was in reference to linguistic signs, I assume Saussure as a starting point as his work was influential in establishing the logical positivism inherent to modern descriptivism.

moral negotiation²; through descriptivism, linguists assert the necessity of scientific empiricism in the study of language and a neutrality towards linguistic fitness regarding the production of words; and through prescriptivism, various institutions outline the perceived correctness of usage – the Académie Française would no doubt maintain that *arbre* possesses an immutably correct form in citation of the prominent linguistic ideologies of that institution. Altogether, the domain of linguistics constitutes the formal and informal frameworks within which individuals take stances toward and construct ideologies around the domain of language, though its approach to such ideologies have been criticized before (for a thorough argument against Saussure’s logical positivism, see Vološinov 1929).

Yet, in the domain of the philosophy of linguistics, linguists also maintain moral and ethical frameworks pertaining to the domain of linguistics; even simply arguing for the empirical validity of descriptivism over prescriptivism necessitates some philosophical moralizing. Here, I delineate three sub-domains: research ethics, meta-theory, and transcriptivism. The distinction between these sub-domains is a matter of their object. Succinctly, research ethics is concerned with research process; meta-theory is concerned with linguistic theory; and transcriptivism is concerned with research products as well as with the moral responsibilities of linguists. Of course, process, form, and product are inextricably connected in any science, let alone linguistics. Therefore, their differentiation here is largely artificial for the purposes of this paper. Now, returning to our thought experiment, what can this superordinate domain tell us about a descriptivist approach to the word *arbre*? Probably not much. The word *arbre* is, to my knowledge, hardly that which necessitates a moral stance. However, if one replaced the word *arbre* in our thought experiment with the word *faggot*, it is easy to see how this might alter a linguist’s position or impose certain moral obligations. A purely descriptive approach would do nothing on its own to condemn the word as a slur: it would only be capable of describing its usage, distribution, and any accompanying attitudes or ideologies.

However, the ideals of transcriptivism as a framework are not entirely new to the field of linguistics. Exceptionally, Rickford and King (2016: 980) ask that “if language is what most distinctly makes us human, shouldn’t linguists (the experts on language) be more centrally involved in vital human issues involving language?” The authors go on to state, in reference to the unjust treatment of Rachel Jeantel’s usage of AAVE during the George Zimmerman trial, that it is linguistics itself that is on trial. While not explicitly affirmed, the authors outline the moral responsibility of linguists regarding the widespread mischaracterization of dialects other than Standard English in the courtroom. Proactively, they offer numerous suggestions for fulfilling that responsibility: they argue that linguists should 1) conduct further research on cross-dialect intelligibility, while being sensitive to the intersection of language and race, 2) be willing to take part in legal cases involving AAVE speakers, 3) work to uplift the voices and perspectives of vernacular speakers through education on the subject, 4) provide vernacular speakers the assistance needed to learn Standard English “as an additional variety if they want to,” 5) advocate for vernacular dialect interpreters in the courtroom, 6) work to end “peremptory strikes against African American jurors,” 7) advocate for juror access to transcripts and for

² At first glance, Transcriptivism and Verbal Hygiene, as developed in Cameron (1995), may appear remarkably similar. The difference here is that Verbal Hygiene concerns the morality of prescriptive judgments in popular discussion and that Transcriptivism concerns the moral obligation of linguists, as scientists, in relation to descriptive frameworks. In that these descriptive Linguistics is concerned with language and that linguists are simultaneous members of language communities, there may be some overlap between Transcriptivism and Verbal Hygiene. However, as demonstrated in this paper, any overlap is purely incidental to the unavoidable fact that linguists are also language users, as being such is a necessary hazard of the field.

development of anarcho-liberalism⁷ in political theory is in part derivative of his argument for an innate system of grammar, representative of the fundamental equality of humans outside of the artificial institutions of modernity: of note here, he states that “Language, in its essential properties and the manner of its use, provides the basic criterion for determining that another organism is a being with a human mind and the human capacity for free thought and self-expression” (2013: 126). Whatever be the relation between his political philosophy and linguistic program, Chomsky does not specifically fulfill a moral responsibility to *linguistic* concerns, though he may at times touch on these concerns indirectly. While his goals are generally oriented toward the betterment of society and the critique of oppressive institutions, he has not fulfilled any specific moral obligations to the transcription of linguistic knowledge in such endeavors.

In contrast, George Lakoff has applied his own work on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) to contemporary issues in political philosophy and discourse, largely in criticism of conservative and neo-liberal political models (1991, Lakoff & Johnson 1987). For instance, he provides the metaphor *nation as family* as a deconstruction of American systems of political ideology and morality, wherein conservative institutions specifically function under the “strict father” model and liberals work within a “nurturing parent” model (Lakoff 2006: 66-68). Yet, Lakoff also takes great pains to make it clear that he is not undertaking a prescriptivist project: “I am *describing* these models, not *proposing* them. To observe the existence of the nation-as-family metaphor in the cognitive unconscious of Americans is not to say that it is good or bad. It is simply there” (68). Although he is using linguistic methodology and research to support his argument, Lakoff is not taking a moral stance regarding that research or to the described cognitive models themselves; in many ways, while he may condemn the goals and outcomes of particular ideologies, Lakoff retains a neutral perspective in how they pursue ideology through conceptual framing and metaphors (2008). Therefore, he, like Chomsky, is not operating within what we may now call transcriptivism, precisely because he fails to take a moral stance towards linguistic concerns and the research thereof.

The works of Chomsky and Lakoff serve as important examples of socially engaged writing that simultaneously maintains a moral neutrality regarding linguistics and, indirectly, language. Even in Lakoff’s “[this] is not to say that it is good or bad,” one can observe the fundamental danger of modern descriptivist approaches to language. Within this framework, everything becomes simply production and perception. Yet, there has been a growing number of linguists who have considered issues of linguistic morality, or perhaps linguistic justice, in their own research to at least a marginal degree. These approaches have criticized what populations are centralized in research practices, attempted to integrate intersectional approaches to language into their methodology, or have considered the effects of oppressive institutions on identity-construction through language (Charity Hudley et al. 2018, Kiesling 2018, Barrett 2017, Blau 2017, Rickford and King 2016, Levon 2016, Kubanyiova 2008, Lippi-Green 1997). Nonetheless, these approaches to varying degrees have set consideration of moral obligation to the side or avoided the topic altogether.

Yet, one would expect that linguists, as moral agents, must have some level of moral obligation to social issues involving language, and if so, a failure to meet those obligations must constitute an abdication of morality in favor of hard empiricism. While not all linguistics research may be considered easily applicable to a transcriptive ethical framework (syntax and formal semantics, for example), it still seems contingent upon linguists to not only weigh the

⁷ While he uses this terminology, he does align himself, by his own admission, more closely with European Libertarianism, but avoids the term *Libertarian* mostly to prevent confusion with the American Libertarian tradition.

approaches, challenging the idea of “war and mass murder as ‘voiceless’ acts of violence and [pointing] out that no human action unfolds without linguistic and symbolic meanings and contexts” (Kaplan 2009: 9). Though his treatment of the concept here is specific to the Holocaust and Nazi discourse, Kaplan builds from Arendt’s earlier differentiation of linguistic and physical violence to argue for their immutable interconnectedness. However, not all forms of linguistic violence lead to genocide. To clarify this problem, William Gay argues that linguistic violence can be placed along a continuum from subtle forms such as children’s jokes to abusive forms such as racist, sexist, or homophobic language, and ultimately to the grievous forms of violence that seek to silence or eliminate entire populations (1998a). Altogether, while instances of language usage may not constitute literal acts of physical violence, there is some consensus on the issue about how language can enact and structure systems of violence, even in intermediate forms.

Therefore, I argue that linguists, as experts in the study of language, have a moral obligation to unequivocally condemn instances of linguistic violence, wherein they have an inherent capacity to cause harm to individuals and marginalized social groups. In fulfilling this obligation, I further argue that linguists must go beyond a simple condemnation and instead pursue the disarmament of linguistic violence. This linguistic disarmament would entail, within a transcriptivist framework, the active application of linguistics research to the task of mitigating or preventing violence as it occurs in relation to language. By definition, this far exceeds the limits of the “Do No Harm” principle and is in all senses a completely unrealistic project. Humans have a natural capacity, if not a proclivity, for violence. Such a regretful fact has been observed by innumerable historians, philosophers, and misanthropes over the centuries (Girard 1972, Arendt 1970, amongst many others). Therefore, regardless of the moral obligations of the linguist, to what extent can linguistic violence be successfully disarmed? In on such attempt at clarifying this issue, William Gay attempts to provide a solution in the form of linguistic nonviolence but fails to convincingly disentangle nonviolent discourse from utilitarian systems or power (1998b). Essentially, linguistic nonviolence cannot convincingly extricate itself from the same systems of violence that it attempts to resist. Furthermore, as was detailed earlier, recent contributions to this line of inquiry have offered solutions to both internal and external moral questions – as well as racialized forms of linguistic violence, both as a matter of language and of linguistics as a discipline – and have considered the effects of these proposals beyond the academic institution (Rickford & King 2016, Charity Hudley et al. 2018). Yet, how to generalize a principle of linguistic disarmament, as a counter to linguistic violence, remains a problem for any linguistic moral framework. It could be as simple as stating in a publication that *linguistic act X is morally reprehensible* or making it clear that *linguistic act X enacts violence within historical and contemporary systems of oppression*. However, moral neutrality – or to frame it more actively, the abdication of morality – is in no way an adequate solution. It is morally contingent upon linguists to take a stance on language and its usage when it constitutes linguistic violence.

To better demonstrate the issues at hand, specifically how to incorporate transcriptive approaches to Linguistics within research on language usage, I consider here a small case study in linguistics research on language ideology in the state of Tennessee during the Fall of 2015 and the Spring of 2016. During that time, the University of Tennessee’s Pride Center published a gender-neutral pronoun guide on the university’s website. Specifically, the pronoun chart included a variety of gender-neutral pronouns: they/them/theirs, ze/hir/hirs, ze/zir/zirs, and xe/xem/xyrs. As was and remains evident, the chart listed the pronouns only as a guide to usage

it asserts the historical and contemporary validity of gender-neutral pronouns and explores both advantages and disadvantages to gender-neutral pronoun guidelines on university campuses. However, the very act of publication in the university's undergraduate journal, and its subsequent publication to the university website, ensured that a gender-neutral pronoun guideline would exist in some form on the very website that had been forced to remove the Pride Center's guideline under threat from the state legislature. This is essentially an act of transcriptive linguistics, though in an underdeveloped form, as the publication acts as a silent condemnation of the Tennessee Legislature's linguistic violence against the LGBTQ+ community as encoded in the defunding of the Pride Center and Office of Inclusion and Diversity. In short, the publication undermined the legislature's attempt to ban gender-neutral pronoun education by forcing a decision on academic freedom of speech.

Note that Darr and Kibbey (2016) do not make any pseudo-prescriptions based in linguistics research, nor do they take an explicit moral stance on the Tennessee Legislature's actions. The product of the research, the paper itself, takes a transcriptive approach in that it is inherently dissident by design. However, a more thoroughly transcriptive approach would have included an explicit condemnation of the linguistic violence innate to language ideologies which allow for misgendering on the basis of "traditional usage" Yet, the paper itself is not purely descriptive either, as it undercuts the legislature's attempt to deny the existence and rights of the state's LGBTQ+ community and implicitly advocates for gender-neutral pronoun usage at the university. Furthermore, as it pertains to the moral responsibility of linguists, a transcriptivist position would also necessitate public engagement and education, advocacy against related LGBTQ+ legislation, and the explicit condemnation of further attempts to deny LGBTQ+ rights through legislative and linguistic acts of violence. While the authors do not engage in any research that would "cause harm," they do not take any steps to *prevent harm*, and the difference between the two constitutes the central point of contention between transcriptive and purely descriptive approaches to linguistics.

As a reproach, one might argue that taking a moral stance against ideologies that enact linguistic violence, as in the above example, is beyond the capabilities of linguists generally or that the linguistic violence in this example is an indirect product of much larger systems of anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies. While the Tennessee Legislature argues against the promotion of gender-neutral pronouns, it can be argued that this is too far abstracted from actual instances of misgendering and therefore does not itself constitute an act of linguistic violence. So, let us consider a simplified version of misgendering as an instance of language usage. Assume that an individual, Sam, identifies as non-binary and uses they/them/their pronouns. Another individual, Adam, does not recognize non-binary pronouns as a legitimate part of his idiolect, and regardless of his membership in the LGBTQ+ community or his personal identity, categorically refuses to use them. If Adam knows that Sam uses non-binary pronouns and has not misgendered them by accident, then Adam's refusal to use Sam's pronouns when referring to them constitutes an intentional linguistic act. As a matter of principle, let us also assume that every individual has an inviolable right to propriodescriptively determine their own gender identity with the entailment that they also have a fundamental right to how that identity is represented linguistically. This assumed, Adam's intentional misgendering of Sam is an act of linguistic violence, or in Gay's (1998a) terminology, an abusive form of linguistic violence. While Adam may not find the act of misgendering offensive, as we can assume Sam would, the fact that both are conscious of the degradation inherent to intentional acts of misgendering would render Adam's intentional act an oppressive form of language. Excluding the possibility that Adam is unaware of misgendering's

property of degradation, it is evident that Adam is misgendering Sam as an act of linguistic violence.

In consideration of the example above, any descriptive approach to misgendering that does not condemn such an act as a form of linguistic violence is taking part in an explicit abdication of morality. Furthermore, Adam himself is maintaining a morally neutral stance in favor of the pure description of his own idiolect, making an implicit argument that his usage of language is equal to Sam's. This moral neutrality, in the face of linguistic violence or at the very least oppression, represents a fundamentally immoral position. The language of the oppressor is not equal to the language of the oppressed. Arguing for such a comparability on the grounds of linguistic descriptivism is nothing short of a shameful appeal to empiricism for the sake of empiricism, without regard to the harm that *is allowed* by such a stance. Though I have only offered a few brief examples of linguistic violence specific to the act of misgendering, I feel well-positioned to state that linguistic violence in general is a compelling argument for a closer examination of the moral responsibilities specific to linguists. There are yet more far reaching and innumerable examples of language usage and language-related social issues that require a similar examination, and they deserve equal treatment in defining the upper-bounds of transcriptive practice.

5. Conclusion and call to action. Echoing Eckert (2013), not every linguist has the ability to change society; what is of more concern here, however, is whether or not any attempt was made in the first place. By and large, many of the formalist sub-disciplines – syntax, semantics, morphology, etc. – may be forgiven if they do not attempt to seek out applications for their work, as it can often be highly theoretical. However, there can still be transcriptive approaches to formal Linguistics: intersectionality, is one such exemplar. On pursuing intersectional frameworks, Crenshaw (1989: 167) states that “we may develop language which is critical of the dominant view and which provides some basis for unifying activity... [which] should facilitate the inclusion of marginalized groups.” Since its formulation, intersectionality has admittedly been an academic buzzword, but it deserves mentioning here as it has *become* a buzzword. Intersectional approaches to linguistics deserve more than the cursory treatment they often have received, and there is nothing ostensibly obstructing formal linguistics from incorporating intersectionality in their research and practice. Linguists can be transcriptive simply by uplifting and including members of marginalized groups in various opportunities within institutions and scholarly research. All that is required for linguist to be transcriptive is that we avoid moral neutrality within the discipline and in our treatment of language-related social issues. As members of society, linguists cannot afford to abdicate moral responsibility when such an abdication would allow for immoral acts of any form but especially when those acts are linguistic in nature.

If transcriptivism as outlined here seems cursory, that is because it is. Descriptivism as a methodology has for quite some time crept into the domain of linguistic ethics and has proliferated a sense of *empiricism at all costs*. Moral abdication has become normative without critical consideration of the moral responsibility that linguists have to society. In attempting to “Do No Harm,” linguistics has often elided any obligation to preventing harm and to seeking research applications to the betterment of society. So my treatment of linguists' moral responsibility is, by necessity, cursory. While these issues of moral responsibility have been considered elsewhere, their treatment has so far been unfocused. I do not pretend to know with any certainty the answer to moral philosophy, which has and continues to elude the very philosophers who have dedicated their work to its pursuit. Through my brief exploration of

linguistic violence, I have attempted only to demonstrate the need for transcriptivism as a framework of moral inquiry within linguistics. I have only intended to provide a forum for discussion, with the boundaries carefully defined and the stakes made clear. If linguists do not seek to address societal issues involving language, who will? Who else would have the expertise to do so? The pursuit of linguistic truths is not sufficient for our work as linguists, and if we only avoid causing harm, then the prevention of harm will always be perceived as separate and distinct from the discipline's core, guiding ethics.

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