

The Open Letter: Responses and recommendations

Itamar Kastner, Hadas Kotek, Anonymous, Rikker Dockum, Michael Dow, Maria Esipova, Caitlin M. Green, Elise Stickles & Todd Snider*

Abstract. Since its publication in July 2020, the Open Letter to the LSA regarding Steven Pinker has evoked many passionate reactions. The letter argued that Pinker’s public statements are inconsistent with the LSA’s anti-racist values, asking to revoke Pinker’s status as LSA Fellow and to remove him from the LSA’s list of Media Experts. Signed by 600+ linguists, the letter has generated vigorous debate within and outside linguistics. This talk pushes the discussion forward by analyzing the responses to the letter using the tools of our profession—pragmatics and discourse analysis—and further suggesting an approach for examining the power of all individuals in the field.

Keywords. discipline of linguistics; linguistics in the media; power structures; pragmatics

1. Introduction. In summer 2020, the field of linguistics was shaken by an open letter submitted to the Linguistic Society of America on behalf of over 600 signatories (Open Letter to the LSA 2020, henceforth TOL). TOL argues that public statements made by Steven Pinker are inconsistent with values that the LSA publicly espouses, and therefore asks LSA leadership to revoke his status as LSA Fellow and to remove him from its list of Media Experts. Since TOL appeared, the field has witnessed vigorous debates surrounding not only the status of its claims, but also broader issues of hierarchy and power.

Much of this debate has taken place on social media—in networks which not all linguists have access to—and in various news outlets. Our goal is not to rehash the content of TOL (which was written by a different group of linguists), but to correct the public record and take stock. In the remainder of this section we provide a brief summary of events (drawing on Kastner et al. 2021). Section 2 discusses the reception of TOL, separating it into the falsehoods propagated by Pinker and his associates, on the one hand, and the well-intentioned but ineffective responses within the field, on the other hand. Section 3 draws lessons going forward, urging us all to consider the power hierarchies we are part of.

1.1. THE TOL TIMELINE. TOL was published by its anonymous authors on July 1, 2020 (Open Letter to the LSA 2020), calling for “the removal of Dr. Steven Pinker from both our list of distinguished academic fellows and our list of media experts” because of behavior that “is systematically at odds with the LSA’s recently issued statement on racial justice”. It publicly opened for signatures on the afternoon of July 3, 2020, at which point multiple social media posts about it started to appear. Within 72 hours, over 500 signatures had been collected, and a vigorous debate had begun on social media. The letter was only open to signatures over

* We acknowledge two co-authors who chose to remain anonymous. We also thank David Adger, Karlos Arregi, Mateus Barros, Hagit Borer, Claire Bower, Lauren Clemens, Daniel Duncan, Martín Fuchs, Carrie Gillon, Laura Grestenberger, Heidi Harley, Pauline Jacobson, Barbara H. Partee, David Pesetsky, Jessica Rett, Gary Thoms, Adina Williams, Michelle Yuan, one colleague who chose to remain anonymous, audiences at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the LSA, and the many other colleagues who shared their thoughts and encouragement with us. Online Appendix: <https://lsa-letter-meta.carrd.co/>. Authors: Kastner, University of Edinburgh (itamar.kastner@ed.ac.uk), Kotek, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (hkotec@alum.mit.edu), Dockum, Swarthmore College (rdockum1@swarthmore.edu), Dow, Université de Montréal (michael.dow@umontreal.ca), Esipova, University of Oslo (mariia.esipova@iln.uio.no), Green (caitlin.green.linguistics@gmail.com), Stickles, University of British Columbia (elise.stickles@ubc.ca) & Snider, Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf.

a single weekend, which coincided with the July 4th holiday in the USA. It was submitted to the LSA Executive Committee (EC) on July 6.

As we review in Kastner et al. 2021, the quick transition from publication to submission happened in response to intense public attention (involving attacks and fake signatures), including from Pinker himself and from linguist John McWhorter, then-chair of the LSA Public Relations Committee. The public attacks are documented in our [Online Appendix](#). While negative replies to Pinker’s tweets can be found over this period in general, we found no evidence of abuse related to support for TOL.

On July 8, the EC issued a statement which does not mention TOL but was taken to be a response to it, stating that “it is not the mission of the Society to control the opinions of its members, nor their expression” (LSA Executive Committee 2020b). The statement further announced the establishment of two task forces (see LSA Executive Committee 2020d). Pinker took this message to signal the support of the LSA, celebrating his exoneration in a series of statements we critique in Section 2.

By July 15, 2020, the LSA had reorganized its Media Experts page, moving Pinker towards the bottom of the page. On July 17, 2020, the page was taken down entirely as it was being re-evaluated by the LSA. Pinker is thus no longer listed as a media expert. On July 17, 2020, the EC issued a second statement to its membership (LSA Executive Committee 2020c), clarifying that the first statement “was not intended to be a rejection of the open letter”.

1.2. MEDIA COVERAGE. Once word of TOL spread outside of linguistics, many op-eds and articles began to appear in international media. These include articles and interviews with Pinker in *The New York Times* (Powell 2020), *The Atlantic* (Friedersdorf 2020), *Mother Jones* (King 2020), *The Telegraph* (Stanley 2020), *The Times* (Whitworth 2020), *BBC Radio 4* (Montague 2020), *Reason* (Bailey 2020) and *Die Welt am Sonntag* (Delius 2020). Examination of the LSA Letter Timeline (2020) reveals that TOL was mentioned or discussed in at least 60 news outlets, 20 of which are based outside of the USA.

Few linguists were interviewed and quoted in these articles, with the notable exception of McWhorter (Friedersdorf 2020; Powell 2020), who had expressed views in support of Pinker. At least three linguists who were interviewed for these same pieces and expressed views in support of TOL were not mentioned (Gillon and Figueroa 2020; Hammerly 2020; Rett 2020b). TOL signatories and others who support their views have been unable to publish op-eds in national media outlets. These include at least three linguists (Daniel Duncan, Caitlin Green, and Jessica Rett, p.c.), who have approached the following venues: *Inside Higher Ed*, *Slate*, *The Atlantic*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Conversation*, *The Guardian* and *Vox*. Perhaps the sole exception is Joseph McVeigh, who was interviewed by the radio program *W Radio Colombia* (W 2020).

Observers from outside the field—and many linguists as well—were essentially only exposed to Pinker’s claims. We next explain how these claims were flawed.

2. Responses. We first identify the three main components of Pinker’s public statements about TOL which were echoed in the media, challenging each in turn. We then touch on responses within the field, which amounted to well-intentioned but ultimately inadequate attempts to restore the peace. See Kastner et al. 2020, 2021 for further analysis.

2.1. DISTORTIONS.

2.1.1. CLAIM 1: TOL WAS “REJECTED”. Pinker publicly claimed that the LSA “received the petition, considered it over the weekend, and just repudiated it” (Pinker 2020d), citing the LSA’s first email to its membership. He repeated this claim in a tweet on July 10, 2020, stating that “It was a petition TO the LSA, which the Society did not accept” (Pinker 2020j), and again in another tweet, stating that “the Linguistics [sic] Society of America rebuffed the petition” (Pinker 2020k).

This claim was repeated in several news outlets. For example, on July 15, 2020, *The New York Times* printed, “The linguists demanded that the society revoke Professor Pinker’s status as a ‘distinguished fellow’ and strike his name from its list of media experts. The society’s executive committee declined to do so last week” (Powell 2020). Then-President of the LSA Marianne Mithun was implicated as well when Pinker was quoted by *The Telegraph*: “[T]he president of the society ‘didn’t express any sympathy for the letter and the society itself repudiated it’.” (Stanley 2020)

Despite Pinker’s numerous claims that TOL was evaluated by the LSA and rejected, this claim is false, as stated by the LSA itself: “[T]he recent message from the Executive Committee to the membership, despite alternative interpretations placed on it by some, was not intended to be a rejection of the open letter” (LSA Executive Committee 2020c). Moreover, while it is true that then-LSA President Mithun did not express any sympathy for TOL, she did not express any opposition either, given that she issued no public statement whatsoever.

The removal of the Media Experts list from the LSA website and the creation of task forces charged with (a) rethinking the LSA’s media strategy and (b) creating a formal process for lodging complaints against current LSA members can clearly be interpreted as a response to the requests in TOL. We take Pinker’s de facto removal from the Media Experts page to reflect the LSA’s consideration, if not acceptance, of one of the two requests in TOL. At the least, in the wake of TOL, the LSA determined that the Media Experts list and the process by which Media Experts are selected needed thorough reconsideration. Nevertheless, Pinker’s false claim is the one that persisted in media coverage.

2.1.2. CLAIM 2: SUPPORT FOR THE LETTER IS INSIGNIFICANT. The second claim from Pinker casts the signatories as junior and not representative of the field. On July 5, 2020, he implored: “Don’t blame established linguists: I recognize only one name among the signatories” (Pinker 2020b). In the same thread, Pinker (2020c) linked to a critical article which claimed that “Many of the signatories are grad students and undergrads” (Coyne 2020a). Pinker also repeated these assertions in interviews at the time (Copeland 2020; Montague 2020; Sayers 2020: 1:20), as well as months later in December 2020, stating in an interview with *The Sun* that the signatories were “several hundred grad students and postdocs” (Edginton 2020).

Before critiquing this claim, we emphasize that the rank of the signatories should not matter: junior members of the field are still members of the field, and in fact junior scholars are the future of any field. Given the less prominent status of junior scholars, the message that their opinions are not important discourages them from publicly voicing opinions (Arregi et al. 2020; Borer 2020a; Ramchand 2020). With that in mind, we can still challenge Pinker’s second claim.

Kastner et al. (2021) and Dow (2020) analyzed TOL signatories by rank, classifying 606 signatories as in Table 1. They found that more than 30% of the letter’s signatories are tenured

or tenure-track, and of these, over 100 signatories are tenured or retired professors, in contrast with the claim about seniority.

	Student	Non-tenure-track (post-doc/VAP/etc)	Pre-tenure	Tenured/retired	Industry/alt-ac	Totals
TOL N	257	85	70	119	75	606
TOL %	42.4%	14.0%	11.6%	19.6%	12.4%	100%

Table 1. Signatories of TOL by career stage

What’s more, the makeup of signatories reflects the general makeup of the LSA membership. The LSA’s Annual Report (Linguistic Society of America 2020) reported a total of 3,297 members, classified as either Student, Faculty, Industry and alt-ac, or Other. Collapsing the coding of Non-tenure-track, Pre-tenure, and Tenured/retired into one category, “All Faculty,” the comparison in Table 2 reveals that the ratios in TOL and within the LSA membership are overall fairly similar. As far as career stage is concerned, the TOL signatories constitute a reasonable representation of the LSA membership at large.

	Student	All faculty	Industry/alt-ac	Other	Totals
TOL N	257	274	75	N/A	606
TOL %	42.4%	45.2%	12.4%	0.0%	100%
LSA 2019 N	1044	1276	211	766	3297
LSA 2019 %	31.7%	38.7%	6.4%	23.2%	100%

Table 2. Signatories of TOL by career stage — comparison with LSA membership

Another method of evaluating Pinker’s claim is to focus on individuals rather than groups. Kastner et al. (2021) found that 7 other LSA Fellows are themselves signatories; similarly, 19 signatories meet the notability guidelines of English Wikipedia and have articles at the time of writing. Most senior signatories had signed within the first 72 hours; but Pinker’s claims regarding seniority continued for weeks and even months later (e.g., Edginton 2020; Montague 2020).

2.1.3. CLAIM 3: TOL IS A “CANCELLATION” ATTEMPT. The final claim consists of two parts: that TOL constitutes an attempt to “cancel” Pinker, with such attempts intimidating more junior members (Pinker 2020q,r). Pinker retweeted several articles and interviews promoting this claim (Bailey 2020; Sayers 2020; Stanley 2020; VerBruggen 2020; Whitworth 2020). He additionally shared several articles that refer to a perceived danger to young scholars, who may feel intimidated by the attack on a prominent scholar. For example, “Steven Pinker won’t be canceled — but you could be” (Cammack 2020).

The framing of TOL as “cancellation” ascribed intent to the authors without addressing its actual content. This reframing also created opportunities for audiences to misconstrue TOL as a demand for material damage to Pinker: “Note undercurrent in this article [Powell 2020] that reveals the true motive of cancel culture: destroy the lives & livelihood of anyone who doesn’t perfectly fit the orthodoxy” (Shermer 2020).

The themes surrounding the discussion of TOL (e.g., military siege, authoritarianism, and religion) exemplify the reproduction of cancellation discourse and its intersection with power,

and as such, warrant a detailed analysis which is beyond the scope of this paper. See also Isackson 2020 and Kastner et al. 2020 for discussion.

2.1.4. ANALYSIS. We have just documented three ways in which Pinker has been shaping the public discourse around TOL and himself, facilitated by the media, even while none of these claims are accurate. We now provide a brief evaluation of the ways in which these false claims are being promulgated, identifying three rhetorical tactics.

First, Pinker and his associates have **obfuscated**. The assertion that the then-President of the LSA “didn’t express any sympathy for the letter” (Stanley 2020) suggests a clear inference, namely that the president entertained TOL and expressed a negative view toward it. We can reach this inference by calculating a relevance implicature (Grice 1975; Levinson 2000): if we are told about the LSA president’s views, there must be some relevant event where those views were conveyed to Pinker in some way. Moreover, the use of negation can potentially give rise to a negative strengthening effect (Horn 1989: 333): readers infer that the president of the LSA not only did not express sympathy for the letter, but condemned it. As with other conversational implicatures, however, these inferences are cancellable: it is possible that the president did not express any sympathy for TOL because she expressed no opinions about it whatsoever. This fact is the driving force behind this tactical move: although the inferences we describe here are natural ones to draw in the present context, they are never asserted. Therefore, any claim of misrepresentation directed at Pinker is deniable.

Second, they minimize the signatories consistently (Duncan 2020), resorting to **ad-hominem attacks** and appeals to authority. As noted earlier, junior scholars are the future of any field, so their views should always be considered. Yet Pinker and his associates went further in outright insulting their junior colleagues. In a July 25 interview, Pinker stated that the signatories’ criticisms were “out to lunch” and “delusional,” and alluding to a statement on TOL made by journalist Matt Taibbi (Taibbi 2020) (which Pinker also re-tweeted), suggested that their research was similar to “excited Christians who see images of Jesus in tree stumps and wall mold” (Park and Bagaria 2020: 30:25; Pinker 2020i). In a July 6 tweet, McWhorter called signatories “demons at the gates” (2020). See the [Online Appendix](#) for many additional examples; to date, Pinker has not publicly indicated disapproval of this strategy.

Third, the actual issues could not be discussed because the **discourse was drowned with variants on another theme**. Pinker and his associates produced many overlapping statements which, as a whole, create a fabricated feeling of persecution. Similarly, the language of anti-TOL discourse used repeated allusions to violence and authoritarian regimes: “defenestration” (McWhorter 2020), “shot across the bow” (Sayers 2020: 3:55), “zealots” (Coyne 2020a), “Orwellian” (Whitworth 2020) and so on (Kastner et al. 2020).

In sum, the first set of responses came from Pinker and his associates. These responses dominated media coverage. They can also be thoroughly refuted, as we have just done. Looking at the responses within the field next, we will see that the lack of a strong response from within linguistics has allowed the false narrative to dominate the media.

2.2. WELL-INTENTIONED LETDOWNS. We are now in a position to evaluate the reception in the field. Within linguistics, we identify two relevant groups: one which agreed that TOL raised important issues the field should address, and one which didn’t. Broadly speaking, this is also the division between those who took TOL to be part of a much broader pattern and those that took the tweets documented in TOL to be the beginning and end of what anyone

had to criticize about Pinker. The former consists to some extent of junior linguists and the latter of senior linguists. This field-internal power differential, combined with the exclusion from the media documented above, led to the former camp feeling like its views were left unheard.

While the response of the LSA as an organization is most important, two other contributions have often come up in conversations around this topic, so we will mention them here briefly as well.

2.2.1. **THE LSA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.** The LSA's response was summarized in Section 1.1. We find that it was (a) slow, responding after a few days to events that happened rapidly on social media; (b) equivocal, in making general statements that did not take a firm stand ("it is not the mission of the Society to control the opinions of its members", LSA Executive Committee 2020b); (c) hesitant, in not publicly challenging the false claims, allowing them to dominate the media narrative; and (d) opaque, in that the Executive Committee's strategy for dealing with the events was not shared with the membership.

2.2.2. **PARTEE 2020.** The first individual contribution to be pointed out is a blog post by Barbara H. Partee from July 6, 2020 (Partee 2020). This post evaluates the arguments in TOL, concluding that all arguments can be dismissed or attributed to a misunderstanding, rendering the requests in TOL unwarranted. Regardless of Partee's intentions, her post was taken by many as an evaluation of the totality of claims levied against Pinker and, thus, a justification to end the conversation. We suspect that Partee's prominent status lent her post more weight than that of other linguists who published posts about TOL around the same time, taking the view that there is more to the case against Pinker than the six examples mentioned in TOL (see Adger 2020, Esipova 2020, Green 2020, Rett 2020a, Snider 2020, and Stalley 2020). While popular media served as platforms to promulgate a one-sided narrative to the general audience, Partee's reputation played a similar role within the field. Readers who took Partee 2020 to be the authoritative response to TOL, especially those less commonly on social media and those less willing to engage with analyses by more junior scholars, were left unaware of crucial background discussed in the other pieces mentioned above.

2.2.3. **JACOBSON, PESETSKY AND PARTEE.** Another related event is a Facebook post by Pauline Jacobson, David Pesetsky and Partee (Pesetsky 2020), appearing on July 7, 2020, envisioned as a statement condemning abusive behavior toward TOL signatories that would appeal to a broad audience regardless of stance toward the content of TOL (post authors, p.c.). The post invited signatures from readers who "disagreed for various reasons with the open letter... and therefore did not sign it," but nonetheless wished to express their "strongest possible disapproval" of the "torrent of on-line abuse and contempt launched at the writers and signers of the letter." The post notes that "many of the signers are also early-career linguists," stating that signing "constitutes an act of bravery," since these junior scholars have "everything to lose."

What is again important here is less the intentions behind the post or its specific language, and more how it was received. Despite the authors' intentions, this post was taken by some to be a response to TOL—an anonymous reviewer for Kastner et al. 2021 called it "effectively a counter-petition"—one that does not engage with the content of TOL but rather asks to restore the peace. Importantly, the post calls for calm and good-will, but does not address the sources of discord and does not call for concrete action. The result was viewed by many junior scholars as an empty gesture. As Hadas Kotek (quoted in Borer 2020a) puts it, "keeping the status

quo is not a neutral position; it's a political position that maintains the power in the hands of those who have it, namely the senior people. It is therefore in effect a position that supports Pinker."

2.3. FROM RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS. As a result of these reactions from respected senior linguists, combined with the limited response from the LSA and the media attention TOL garnered, we conclude that the field and its institutions have thus far failed to hear and represent the views of many members, most of whom are junior. Well-intentioned attempts to restore the peace were ultimately inadequate, since they did not tackle the core issues and only muddled discussion within the field. Calls for civility were effectively calls to maintain the status quo, serving to bolster existing power hierarchies.

Having taken stock, we make a number of recommendations going forward, with power hierarchies as our main object of discussion.

3. Recommendations. The events surrounding TOL, and especially the responses discussed in Section 2.2, highlight the fact that power imbalances exist within any given organization and community. The reality of hierarchies isn't necessarily a bad thing in and of itself, but the mere existence of them entails that nearly every individual in the community has some power over someone else. In this section, we urge members of the field of all career stages to become more aware of the power we possess and how we wield it. Some recent events bring this point to the fore (Section 3.1), which we then translate into a set of recommendations (Section 3.2).

3.1. POWER HIERARCHIES. We briefly address two recent controversies from late 2021. Our focus is not on the individuals themselves, but on the power relations that they highlight. Since we decidedly are not trying to draw attention to specifics, we will not provide direct quotations or citations. Readers who find this section too vague could treat the following case studies as mere hypotheticals; see Dockum and Green (Submitted) for a more complete composite case study, and see Willis (2019) on the composite narrative methodology.

3.1.1. BIGOTRY UNDER THE GUISE OF SCIENCE. A senior linguist recently published a manuscript in an online repository which lamented the use of gender-neutral language in contemporary German. Instead of drafting a measured article taking into account the relevant work in sociolinguistics, phonology and morphology, the linguist made unsupported assertions about the types of language users who use gender-neutral language, including the author's speculations about the research productivity of linguists who "gender" (i.e., use gender-neutral language in some contexts). The manuscript contained much inflammatory language directed at the targets of the author's ridicule.

What we have here is a case in which a senior figure attacked those who had less social power (feminists, gender-non-conforming individuals, and so on) and academic power (junior scholars). While the framing was linguistic, the content was not.

Some linguists entered into conversation with the writer, pointing out issues with the linguistic analysis. While we agree that the original analysis was poor, our recommendation would be different. Such a piece should not be accepted as 'science' for its supposed merits to be 'debated'. What must first happen is for the writer to acknowledge their missteps, apologize, resist the allure of calling out 'cancel culture' (cf. Section 2.1.3), and interrogate their own position instead. Only then should the community decide whether to debate the content of the piece.

When senior colleagues do not step in to intervene—even in private conversation with the writer—they are signalling that this behavior is acceptable. It must not be. In terms of power differentials, a full professor might think that they are almost powerless against presumed waves of ‘woke’ “gendering”, but all else being equal, their voice still carries farther than that of their junior peers.

3.1.2. SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTIONS. The last case study is much more subtle in nature. Here, even more than in the previous one, the goal is to draw attention to the issue rather than the individuals. The ‘offense’ is also less egregious in this case, directing our attention not only to power hierarchies but also to the way many of us use social media nowadays.

In a recent Twitter flare-up, a PhD student made a joke about a prominent linguist. Two senior academics (who are not the student’s advisors) called out the student publicly on Twitter, in one case using a lab-affiliated account. At this point another PhD student argued that such a public reaction is not appropriate. One of the senior academics doubled down on their position, and a short back-and-forth ensued.

Taking a step back from the details, we want to draw attention once again to the situation: two senior academics publicly berating a PhD student. Those familiar with the event will know that various other factors might be relevant, including age differences, unhealthy factioning within the field, attitudes to social media and so on. The bottom line remains, though, that there is an asymmetry in such situations, so we all must be careful in how we approach them.

3.2. A WAY FORWARD. In the first part of this paper, we showed how false claims about linguists and the LSA were echoed by major media outlets. What lessons can be learned? We argue that the field—meaning its institutions, including the LSA, as well as individuals—must be unapologetic in correcting the way it is portrayed in the media, as with the false claims about the LSA which were not countered. Following on the theme of power differentials, we also argue that the field should be unapologetic in supporting its junior scholars, especially when they are attacked by highly prominent figures such as Pinker and McWhorter.

But what about us as individuals? The events surrounding TOL mean we must rethink the norms that we have been socialized with, as people in our general society and as academics. Given that everyone has both more and less power than they might realize in a given hierarchy, everyone also has the power to reinforce or challenge norms in the spaces they occupy. What strategies are available often depend on one’s circumstances and career stage.

Ideally, we would all want to reshape the field into one where we achieve *ambient belonging* for all backgrounds and career stages (Walton and Cohen 2007; Cheryan et al. 2011; Cundiff et al. 2013). For this to happen, we all should evaluate our power and influence. Dockum and Green (Submitted) point out that virtually all members of our community have the potential for proactive inclusion:

- Undergraduate students might occupy roles such as teaching assistants, writing tutors, or mentors for their peers. They would consider the biases and assumptions they bring to these tasks.
- Graduate/Postgraduate students are taking steps toward professionalization in the field. They may teach undergraduates or fellow graduate students, and may start participating in field-wide activities such as reviewing, publishing, event organizing, and other kinds of peer scholar interaction.

- Post-degree early career researchers are in the (increasingly long) phase of non-permanent employment, including postdoctoral research and temporary teaching positions. They often engage in very active research and teaching, and thus have influence, but are also in a state of constant employment precarity and therefore lack power.
- Tenure-track faculty are entering a stage of increasing autonomy, stability, responsibility, and influence, while still being professionally vulnerable. They may teach and oversee student research, as well as apply for grants, run research labs, and take journal editorial roles. Their service responsibilities may give them influence on academic job searches and curriculum planning.
- Tenured faculty enjoy significant stability and increasing responsibility (faculty on “open-ended contracts” outside of the North American-style tenure system are more vulnerable). They are in positions of significant influence within departments, and may have influence on the larger field or subfield. For example, they may serve in journal editorial positions and grant review panels, and may lead job searches. They also have more freedom to steer their research towards issues that benefit the greater good, if they wish to do so.
- Full professors are in a position of maximal stability and influence, which they may occupy for decades. They may serve as department chairs, and chair influential committees. This stage presents the greatest opportunity to influence trends of socialization in the field, both structurally through administrative roles, but also often as role models to students and more junior scholars, as their work often draws in new students. For some, this might be a frustrating stage as they get close enough to decision-making forums to see that academics still have limited influence within contemporary higher education institutions; but they can use what power they have for the best.
- Household names, who are a very small group of linguists that wield an outsized influence on the public perception of linguistics, are uniquely situated to influence it for better or worse. They are often the only linguists known to the wider public, to leaders in industry, or to politicians in a position to influence public policy and control public grant programs. This tier could also include linguists who engage with the general public on a large platform, whether in traditional media or social media.
- Linguists beyond academia have many avenues to influence different organizations in ways that linguists in academia do not.

Some individuals may choose to leave academia at any stage; others may receive minimal or no formal training in linguistics, but nonetheless identify as linguists. They are all part of our community.

We therefore invite readers at all career stages to consider their present positionality, their potential future career stages, the influence that they have on those in other stages, and the steps they might take to make our field more inclusive.

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