

We've seen the future (of teaching linguistics): It's inclusive and just for everyone

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1. Introduction. We begin with a well-heeled phrase: “Four linguists walk into a bar...”, only we’ll switch out “bar” for “panel discussion at the Linguistics Society of America (LSA) conference”. (We walked into the bar afterward.) The 2024 LSA conference in New York City presented our foursome with an unparalleled opportunity to explore insights from a range of contributors concerned with teaching linguistics. Our session, organized by the LSA’s Special Interest Group on Scholarly Teaching in Linguistics, brought together in-person and online participants for an exploration of linguistics pedagogy as an avenue for sustaining and advancing the continued growth of our field across a variety of academic institution types and student populations – from community colleges, small liberal arts colleges, and Tribal Colleges, to large-scale public and private universities.

In conversation with an eclectic audience of linguistics professors, students, and enthusiasts, our conference panel observed – excitedly, we might add – that the field of linguistics is approaching a rare tipping point. Many of us are being asked to adapt and proactively plan for new possibilities and talent pipelines, in order to accelerate growth and ensure the longevity of our discipline. We are considering, for example, how:

1. Diverse student populations in introductory linguistics courses across community colleges, Tribal Colleges, small liberal arts colleges, and universities, are not yet amply enough reflected in the demographics of degree graduates and LSA membership, particularly in the U.S. (an observation which points to equity gaps in the academic experience and a need to pay attention to strategic enrollment management);
2. With diverse student populations comes a wider range of abilities, talents, languages, community-engaged interests, and opportunities to support disabled students;
3. Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and speech-enabled tools, and embedded usage of Large Language Models (LLMs), continue to draw upon the expertise and insights of linguists without bringing greater public visibility to the field of linguistics, or adequately entangling with the bias potential of algorithmic scaling;
4. There exists a need for more discussion, coordination, and sharing among linguists to support a proliferation of engagements with students, community, industry, government, and beyond.

In this written follow-up to our conference session, we zero in on academic pedagogy as a key means of addressing these emerging concerns, while ameliorating a longstanding problem faced by our field: linguistics is still a field that many scholars fall into backwards.¹ Because it is not typically offered in U.S. primary or secondary education, many students do not learn about the existence of linguistics until tertiary or post-graduate education. Additionally, linguistics is not uniformly offered across undergraduate or post-graduate institutions in the U.S. – departments, programs, and even courses in linguistics are disproportionately offered at large, well-resourced universities, where the longevity of teaching and research positions in interdisciplinary programs, such as linguistics can

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¹ As far as we know, our coauthor Jessi Grieser coined this phrasing of “backwards.”

be prioritized.² Accordingly, the dearth of linguistics programs impacts the ability of linguists from marginalized communities to enter and sustain academic employment in our field. And if students do develop interest in linguistics, they may become demotivated by the way we introduce it. Across many institutions, courses in foundational linguistic concepts are taught in ways believed by instructors to be “rigorous” or objective, which instead function as barriers to advancement, and students find these encounters “‘exhausting and frustrating’ or ‘a huge hurdle’” (Bjorkman et al. 2024: 9). Such gatekeeping, while framed as “rigor,” serves to maintain a hegemonic standard within linguistics that discourages diversity, excludes difference, and ignores the utility of established and emerging subdisciplines.

The diverse collection of papers in this special issue of the LSA Proceedings extend discussion of these observations and more, with focus on how our teaching of fundamental linguistics concepts can sustain and expand the interest of new generations of students, instructors, and others. A common underpinning, expressed both explicitly and implicitly in these papers, is that a certain rupture needs to be enacted, and indeed is in process of being enacted, to build a future where linguistics and language studies are truly for everyone. In an ideal world, linguistics *should* be for everyone – but the present reality of teaching and learning linguistics in higher education falls short of this ideal. When we say linguistics should be for everyone, we are amplifying our ethical dedication to equity, as a matter of intellectual honesty, continuity, and growth for ourselves and this field of inquiry. If we want linguistics to continue to exist as a discipline, teaching it – and teaching it *well* – is fundamental to that existence.

A linguistics that remains exclusive and/or homogeneous is one that fails to widely recruit future linguists, fails to adequately describe the state of the world, and fails to grow and thrive. Language is one of the holdouts of the great injustices of our modern world: sexism, racism, transphobia, ableism, and all other structural prejudices are continually reproduced through language, and a linguistics that fails to grapple with, address, and combat those forces is both unethical and unscientific. The centering of diverse perspectives is our best defense against these -isms, and excellent and inclusive teaching is the best way to co-create a diverse and just linguistics. As John Baugh (2018: 1), recent past president of the LSA, reminds us, there is an “urgent need to enlist linguistic tools in support of unique and collective efforts to enhance the human condition worldwide.”

At the same time, the gatekeeping that manifests in linguistics classrooms mirrors the persistent marginalization and intentional omission of certain forms of linguistic inquiry across academic linguistics, applied linguistics, and language studies (Dockum & Green 2024; Motha 2020; Thomas & Bucholtz 2021). Indeed, linguistics has long been steered by a focus on particular languages as objects of (neo)colonial inquiry and control (e.g., Irvine 2008; Pugach 2012), this being a strategic goal supported by the exclusion of particular speech communities and linguists from those communities (Charity Hudley, Mallinson & Bucholtz 2020; Rickford 1997). The intersectionality of these exclusions (cf. Tripp 2023 on psycholinguistics, for example), coupled with the marginalization of these linguists and their culturally responsive interventions has, unfortunately, limited the potential of entire pedagogies, methodologies, and epistemologies. Notably, Dockum and Green (2024: 102) emphasize that “for far too many linguists, ‘linguistics’ became mutually exclusive with social and ‘applied’ research so that other

² The appendix of the LSA’s most recent 2021 report of State of Linguistics in Higher Education gives a sense of the nature of the universities and (few) 4-year colleges with linguistics departments, programs, and degree paths. See, for example, the LSA website, where reports are published: <https://www.lsadc.org/content.asp?contentid=437>.

linguists often spent their whole careers hearing their work dismissed as ‘not (real) linguistics’” (citing, as well, Charity Hudley & Flores 2022; Lanehart 2021).

All of this exclusion and blocked access has continued to have a disproportionate impact on the very populations many of us claim we desire to include and learn from. In 1997, John Rickford noted that there were no Black linguists who were faculty members in linguistics departments (p. 169), and later work has tracked what Rickford called a “pipeline problem” (ibid.). Almost thirty years later, in 2024, Bjorkman and colleagues noted the paucity of linguistics degrees offered at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (2024: 11). Additionally, despite the fact that U.S. linguistics “would not exist but for Indigenous languages”, as we are reminded by Jessie Little Doe Baird, linguist and founder of the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, there is a dearth of Native scholars receiving PhDs in Linguistics (Leonard 2020). Too, Indigenous perspectives on language and Indigenous research methodologies are often trivialized and silenced (Leonard 2017; Tsikewa 2021). These persistent inequities have inspired numerous calls to treat the homogeneity and exclusionary nature of linguistics as an urgent priority in need of remedy (Charity Hudley et al. 2020; Leonard 2020; Thomas forthcoming).

Our present review of contributions to this special issue identifies three main themes surfacing across these papers regarding how linguistics pedagogy might be invited to change. First, updating content and curricula can diversify, contextualize, and humanize linguistics in the classroom. Second, adjusting assessments (such as exams, homework assignments, and more) counters exclusionary practices and epistemologies, and demonstrates possible routes of enhancing accessibility. Finally, transforming structural aspects of course design enables an increase in the cultural responsiveness of linguistics for local students and communities. We conclude by discussing further themes, potential new lines of inquiry, and next directions not explicitly examined by authors in this special issue. Our hope is that readers of this volume will be inspired to critically evaluate their own pedagogical practices, and continuously implement incremental changes that improve linguistics at scale for all students, and in service of the continued advancement of our valuable field.

2. Ways to improve content/curriculum and why it matters to linguistics. A persistent problem facing the teaching of linguistics is the tendency to treat language as a decontextualized, dehumanized *object* of study. A related problem in linguistics classrooms is an over-emphasis on dominant languages and varieties, particularly hegemonically powerful varieties of English (see, for example, Kubota 2020 on epistemological racism). Instead, the authors here point to a need to enrich curricula by humanizing and recontextualizing language, emphasizing social and relational approaches to language, and creating teaching materials that cover a wider array of languages and language varieties, including those used locally by students in their everyday lives. In other words, we observe an interest in shifting away from a “one size fits all” approach, to a tailored approach that is sensitized to our students’ interests and needs.

The inclusion of a wider array of languages and varieties allows students to connect with the linguistic material on a more personalized and human level, improving student interest and learning outcomes. Hauser et al. (in this volume) describe a “language of the day” module that uses hands-on activities to directly involve students in the generation of linguistic knowledge. Similarly, Magnum et al. use multimedia and social media as data sources to emphasize language in its social context. Both papers find that contextualizing and humanizing language data increased student engagement with linguistic theory, because students were able to connect course concepts to their own life experiences. We hope to see more of this approach in

linguistics teaching; real-life connections and active learning modalities improve student experiences and learning outcomes in many of the sister fields of linguistics. Moreover, similar approaches can be part of a broader strategy to resist decontextualizing languages, which have served to alienate Indigenous language communities, lands, and ways of life (cf. Twance 2019 on pictographs and rock art termed *mazinaabikiniganan* in Anishinaabe).

This humanizing approach to pedagogy extends to the way linguists teach and incorporate language technology in the classroom. In their paper in this volume, Konnelly and Sanders discuss ways that linguistic knowledge can empower students and help to contextualize their understanding of language technology like LLMs. Rather than responding to panics about AI in student assessment through a punitive approach, Konnelly and Sanders advocate building flexibility and resilience directly into curricula (as opposed to methods in online exam proctoring as advocated by Peete (n.d.), for example, which may be construed as a form of digital surveillance). Hildebrandt also encourages humanizing through technology by positioning students to forge transdisciplinary connections in the use of digital humanities tools while also connecting to broader societal issues in a justice-centered way.

Humanizing linguistic pedagogy is thus, in part, a necessary rethinking of relationality (or lack thereof) as embedded in our discipline, given that emerging technologies are forcing a reckoning with how we define and relate to authentic language, to computational interfaces, and to one another. Seen in this light, these papers are an invitation to embrace humility in teaching. Too often, teaching in academia is hierarchical, with the instructor positioned as the sole knowledge holder. The approaches advocated for in this special issue unsettle this framework. Magnum et al.'s use of social media in the classroom specifically cultivates a curriculum that is relevant to students' lives and interests. Doing this requires vulnerability, an openness to, and a valuing of students' perspectives, identities, lived experiences, and knowledges, in co-construction with students. Hauser et al.'s "language of the day" activity and McCarvel's analytic ethnography exemplify how teachers of linguistics can further lean into this by acknowledging the role of students as knowledge producers. Engaging in these kinds of reframing through teaching disrupts unjust power dynamics and nurtures relationalities that lead to deeper learner engagement.

3. Ways to improve assessment and why it matters to linguistics. *Assessment* is an umbrella term which may cover graded short-term, take-home assignments like homework, as well as in-class, higher-stakes assignments like exams, and other means of evaluating student learning. Within the scholarship of teaching and learning, assessment is its own important subfield, and authors in this volume identify particular strategies as well-suited to the teaching of linguistics. Assessment in linguistics can be tricky, in part, because formal linguistics is a relatively young science (for example, the journal *Language* and the LSA celebrated their first centennial in 2024). Given this relative youth, there may not yet be wide consensus on objective "correct answers" in many areas of linguistics regarding certain theoretical concepts and their application to human expressive phenomena. For example, the coexistence of celebrated approaches to theoretical generative syntax mean that students might feasibly offer an analysis which is "correct" under head-driven phrase structure grammar (HPSG), but not under Minimalist syntax. Thus, linguists must be especially conscientious and creative in how we formulate our assessments to provide for fair and appropriate evaluation, with focus on essential skills of description, reasoning, and argumentation.

The authors in this volume identified challenges that should be of interest to linguists, as well as instructors across higher education. These challenges include navigating generative AI with respect to academic honesty, and how to humanize remote asynchronous learning. Konnelly

and Sanders reframe generative AI as an opportunity for linguistic myth-busting and thoughtful assessment design, rather than a “gotcha” tool for preventing students from “cheating” or plagiarizing. By showing what present-day artificial intelligence tools can and cannot do, Konnelly and Sanders argue that instructors can discuss how LLMs are created and trained, and how they operate on a linguistic level. Instead of simply forbidding the use of artificial intelligence tools in writing assignments, they see value in teaching students *how* and *why* the use of these tools is not as useful for every application. While scholars in many fields have struggled with how to teach and design fair assessments in the age of ChatGPT, Gemini, CoPilot and other generative AI tools, Konnelly and Sanders show that linguistics – and its focus on language mechanics and use – can lead the way by equipping instructors with informed approaches to navigate this accelerated technology transition with more practical and student-centered focus.

Another challenge that instructors continue to grapple with, particularly in the wake of increased use of distance education and remote teaching approaches during the 2020–2023 lockdowns of COVID-19, has been how to humanize remote (and especially asynchronous) learning. Overfelt’s contribution to this volume offers a very elegant solution in the use of scheduled, synchronous video-chat oral exams that facilitate a form of assessment that is personal, adaptive to individual students’ needs and interests, and includes built-in opportunities for students to extend their learning during the course of the assessment itself. As with many of the other papers in this volume, Overfelt’s strategy of one-on-one video discussion exams, between the instructor and the student, is well-suited to teaching linguistics and also generalizable to other fields.

Further, McCarvel describes an assessment format that is designed to encourage students to *think like linguists*. Her assignment of analytic autoethnography, adapted from anthropology pedagogy (Anderson 2006), provides students with opportunities to reflect upon the relevance of linguistic theory to their own personal lives and experiences. While McCarvel does not specifically state that this method is suitable for remote or asynchronous learning, we feel that its implementation may similarly accomplish the personalization that Overfelt’s method of video-chat exams facilitates. Each of these assessment methods invite students to connect linguistics concepts to their personal observations and interests, thereby linking assessment with opportunities for deeper learning.

Fair and practical assessments are one pedagogical dimension through which we, as a field, can demonstrate our investment in retaining students and supporting their success. Promoting students’ understanding of the relevance, skills development, and fairness of assessments can assist in motivating their semester-to-semester persistence, and continued pursuit of linguistics study. Effective assessments, such as the non-traditional grading advocated by Hauser et al. (this volume), promote justice by inviting students into the practice of linguistic inquiry, and providing avenues for students to apply their diverse experiences as a resource in navigating course materials and the field of linguistics, more broadly.

4. Ways to improve organizational/structural course design and why it matters to linguistics. Presented throughout this special issue is a reoccurring emphasis on encouraging students to explore the utility of linguistics concepts and skills in their personal lives beyond the classroom. Several trends emerge within this theme: 1) increasing student investment in their own learning, 2) providing more accessible learning opportunities, and 3) integrating theory and practice from the very beginning, by using methodologies of linguistic inquiry itself to introduce students to theoretical concepts needed for deeper appreciation of language. McGarrity and

Yip describe several ways in which introductory linguistics courses across modalities can be adapted for b/Blind and low vision students, as well as d/Deaf and hard of hearing students. They explore the use of Assisted Design for English Phonetic Tools (ADEPT, Medina González & Hardison 2022), which consists of alternative presentations of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), including tactile IPA, and braille IPA, highlighting advantages and disadvantages of each method.

McGarrity and Yip emphasize the importance of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in designing a course which is accessible to all students from its very conception. And at the same time, they explain some of the challenges faced in expanding access for students of various abilities. For example, while braille IPA may seem an elegant solution, it rests on an assumption that most low vision people read and understand braille, which is not necessarily the case. Additionally, access to tactile IPA may be limited by its availability through local college/university teaching and learning centers, as well as the very practical challenge that handheld tiles in this tactile system may warp under less favorable storage conditions. Beyond these adaptive forms of pedagogical tools, it is also important to pay attention to exploring and experimenting with accessibility tools and modifications, keeping in mind that new and different tools are continually under development, and that students themselves may be partners in their design and use in the classroom.

Other interventions, such as Overfelt's video-chat assessment, increase accessibility across neurotypes. As described by Overfelt, opportunities for retaking tests, especially the option to pre-take a test, and then have the perceived "practice" exam counted as the final grade, allows students who experience test anxiety to have the support they need to demonstrate strong understanding of course content. Additional interventions advocate wholesale rethinking of course design to present material in formats suitable for accessible assessment techniques. This can promote risk-taking and confidence in learning, and may positively change students' expectations about what it means to demonstrate knowledge and understanding.

Further pedagogical interventions are designed around increasing student investment in course content by including them in acts of scholarly inquiry. Grant, for example, describes an activity which invites students in a cognitive science course to participate in a phoneme identification experiment in order to improve their abilities to map cognition to the findings and theories discussed in course materials. The activity includes peer discussion of students' experiences in completing the experiment. Student responses show that this hands-on exploration deepens their understanding of the phenomenon of categorical sound perception and phonemicization, and also gives them confidence in applying course concepts to their everyday lives.

These sorts of creative interventions have the potential to expand and enliven the nature of who is invited to join and contribute to the future of linguistics; inclusive and universally designed activities and assessments create space for people with various disabilities and neurotypes, and provide opportunities for discussion of real-world applications. To achieve this, designing for accessibility cannot be an afterthought. Students recognize and deeply feel when courses and assessments are designed with their needs in mind, which can enhance their investment in linguistics. Rather than retrofitting (aka "remediating") courses, assessments, and assignments to meet the bare minimum of accessibility requirements, we need to proactively engage in teaching as a means of facilitating wider appreciation of the utility of linguistics for everyone.

5. Conclusions and next steps: Why not now? Why not you? This essay has brought together four linguists across differing contexts of U.S. higher education – community colleges, small

liberal arts colleges, and large public universities – to explore insights from new scholarship of teaching and learning in linguistics. Within and beyond linguistics and language studies, targeted attacks on higher education have recently focused on humanities and social sciences, endangering attention to ethics and decolonial approaches, as well as questioning the value of studies deemed not to be revenue-generating. Increasingly, as linguists, we may find ourselves on the defensive, feeling as though we need to justify our discipline as a worthwhile *science*, in order to push back on efforts to minimize the importance and impact of understanding the most fundamental of human abilities: language. However, rather than reacting from a defensive position, we advocate use of inclusive and innovative pedagogy as an offensive strategy. Why not explore opportunities that allow students to showcase and apply information learned in a variety of ways that develop career-oriented skills via approaches described in this special issue (e.g., generative AI, video-chat exams, journalistic presentations using StoryMap by Knight Lab)?

Together, we believe that the perspectives presented in this volume illustrate the extraordinary vitality of linguistics, emanating through the hearts, minds, and classrooms of forward-thinking and student-centered linguists. After all, the world we live in continues to experience consequential shifts in climate, public health, geopolitics, technology, social movements, and affordability and accessibility of higher education. We look to our colleagues' focus on pedagogy as a model in conscientious and self-reflexive engagement with how to strengthen the relevance of linguistics while cultivating new cadres of talented community-engaged theorists, creatives, and problem-solvers.

The varied contributions to this special issue represent a commitment among linguists to respond to contemporary concerns by centering students' interests, concerns, and desires for a better collective future. Together, with our colleagues, we truly believe that linguistics is for everyone, and that language is in everything – including the very words, signs, and tactile tools we use to enact our course design. We advocate for better support for teaching-oriented professional development opportunities for linguists, as well as greater structural valuing of student-centered pedagogy, and sharing of course materials, across the field of linguistics. These may include, for example, Open Educational Resources (OER), such as free, online textbooks and exercises as with the recently published *Essentials of Linguistics, Second Edition* (Anderson et al. 2022), available at no-cost via the Press Books website, and authored by Canada-based faculty members of the Teaching in Linguistics Community of Practice. Use of OER, which are openly licensed teaching materials, can help to reduce student costs and increase affordability of linguistics courses and degree pathways.

Of course, contributors to this special issue are not the first to consider pedagogy as a means of cultivating increased student engagement in linguistics. Community-engaged research, and community-centered collaboration, for example, are often amplified as a means to bring students into the practice of linguistics and language studies (see, for example, Bucholtz 2021). These approaches require vulnerability, power-sharing, and redistribution of resources and may, depending on the scope, compel engagements longer than a semester at a time. Contributions here, by contrast, describe smaller, incremental changes that can be implemented at the scale of individual courses and classrooms, with a view toward longitudinal change and impact (see also Bjorndahl et al. 2024 for more discussion specific to linguistics).

Together, with our colleagues, we believe that language is in everything, including pedagogy. We advocate for better support of teaching-oriented professional development opportunities for linguists, as well as greater, structural valuing of student-centered pedagogy across the field of linguistics. We encourage you to engage and take up any of the classroom

activities, assessment ideas, and other methods presented in this special issue. We invite you to pave the way for a linguistics that truly is for everyone. We ask: Why not you? Why not now?

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