

Introduction

For many years, linguists have been concerned that we're not a visible or vocal enough part of public conversations about language. We have sometimes struggled to disseminate linguistically informed perspectives on relevant social and political issues, explain the importance of linguistic research, and/or share our enthusiasm about language science with a general audience. One strategy for addressing these concerns is to engage with journalists and other members of the popular news media in communicating (a) fascinating aspects of the language people use in their everyday lives as well as of languages they have never gotten to encounter; and (b) ways that linguistics can help explain or illuminate language-related questions that arise in the news and elsewhere. This guide is intended to be a resource for linguists who wish to pursue a proactive approach to garnering press coverage for linguistics or who may be approached by a journalist for comment in advance of a news story.

The guide was prepared in consultation with linguists who have considerable experience on "both sides of the microphone." That is, it was informed by linguists with academic credentials who have worked as journalists, bloggers, and public relations professionals, as well as by linguists who have extensive experience in responding to inquiries from journalists and in explaining their research to a lay audience.

Linguists are sometimes hesitant to engage directly with the news media, especially if they have had a not entirely positive experience in the past. It's worth remembering that most language-related media isn't "gotcha" journalism. Journalists are not trying to set us up to find a gaffe; generally they're looking for intelligent and informed quotes that make them look intelligent and informed by association.

The goal of this guide is to help linguists overcome any concerns they might have about taking on this role, and to demonstrate how engaging with the news media about linguistics research can be both enjoyable and career-enhancing, while also advancing the field and profession. This guide aims to give a clear outline of the expectations of journalists who contact linguists and to give some practical strategies for becoming an effective communicator in this context. Some of the advice in this guide will be relevant to all researchers; however, it is particularly aimed at those in the field of linguistics.

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1. Outreach to the News Media: the Benefits for You, Your Institution, and the Field

Science news happens when journalists believe that academic research will be of interest to the public. The more we are able to address that interest, the more likely it will be that our field will become more visible. The reputation of the field itself, your status in it, and such things as financial support from government and private agencies will be enhanced by a good representation of our findings. Please do not shy away from this important avenue for advancing linguistics.

2. Laying the Groundwork

Make sure your professional profile (on your website, employer site, etc.) is up to date, with current contact details and your expertise listed in a way that makes sense to a general audience. For example, if you say “asynchronous pictorial communication among adolescents,” make sure to also say “teens using emojis in Snapchat.” Even basic terms in the field like *phonology* or *sociolinguistics* may not be especially meaningful for non-experts, so consider how you want to frame your expertise on your website, as compared with an academic CV, etc.

If something relevant to your work is being discussed in the news media, don't hesitate to contact your university's or employer's PR team (where applicable) and let them know you're available for comment, as journalists may contact them to see if anyone is available. If you establish a friendly working relationship, they'll be much more likely to help you when you need to do a news release for your new linguistics lab, or North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO) event, or exciting new research findings.

When something relevant to your work is in the news, also consider writing an op-ed for a local or national news outlet. You will need to write this piece quickly to ensure its relevance within the news cycle. Luckily, these pieces are relatively short compared with the typical academic article and usually draw on research you already know. Be sure to have non-experts read drafts of your op-ed to make sure it is engaging and accessible to a more general audience.

Once you do a few interviews for newspapers, magazines, blogs, radio, etc., your name will start to be “in circulation” as a go-to expert on language-related issues. So in some ways, the biggest challenge is getting your name out there to start with. If you're interested in being contacted, ask to be added to the LSA Media Experts Database. You can also let colleagues who already regularly engage with the media know that you are happy to be a reference on areas within your expertise (as you'll see below, referrals are often part of the process).

3. Generating and Handling News Media Requests

The majority of media requests will come via email or phone, and will either be to ask for an interview or for specific comments. The actual interviewing or commenting may occur via phone, e-mail, or in person. The focus of the requested interview may be your own research or research related to your area of expertise; the interviewer may also be looking for you to comment on a breaking news story with a language component to it. When you have newsworthy work to report, however, it is not in the least inappropriate to make use of your institution's resources and/or the LSA to assist you in making your work known.

Whether or not something is in your area of expertise is not always an easy question to answer. If an interviewer calls up asking about Canadian accents, but you're an expert in Canadian English syntax, you may feel that you're not the best person to ask. Yet compared to the general public, you know a great deal more about Canadian vowels, the changing nature of language and intergenerational variation. You can always check with the journalist if they think you really are appropriate to comment. Remember too to consult the LSA website list of experts if a journalist has not already done so.

By default, this guide presumes that the majority of your requests will come from written media journalists (print or online), though we provide specific advice for several different types of media in the next section.

3.1 Responding to the request

You do not have to agree to every media request, although it is always polite to at least reply. If you do not have time, or you think you would not be an appropriate person to comment, journalists always appreciate it if you can refer them to a colleague with relevant expertise; you know the field much better than they do. It's helpful to let the journalist know if you've contacted your colleague to let them know about the request or not; they'll be particularly appreciative if you put them in touch yourself. Most of the time, journalists are looking for a timely response, rather than the most expert comment. They rarely have the luxury of waiting for busy academics to respond when their first point of contact refers them elsewhere.

When a journalist contacts you, it is okay to ask some follow-up questions before deciding on whether to agree to the interview. Some useful questions:

- What is the venue in which this piece will appear?
- What is the focus of the piece? (A recent research paper? A new bit of slang? How kids are ruining the language?)
- What is the format of the piece? (short daily news story that just needs an incisive expert comment, longer feature story with more detailed interviews)
- Do they want to interview you over the phone or via email?
- What is the timeline for getting the interview scheduled?

If the topic is sensitive, or the interview is to be a long one, you may ask upfront if you will be able to have any say in what will be included in the final interview transcript. Do not be surprised if the journalist says that this goes against their protocol.

Even if you're happy to comment over the phone when a journalist calls you, it's fine for you to ask them to call you back in 30 minutes or an hour ("I just need to read up on a relevant paper/find a pertinent statistic for you" is always a good reason). This gives you time to check up on the venue, the journalist, and get your head around what you may say. Journalists and writers, particularly for newspapers, are often "under deadline," but as long as the interview isn't for live TV/radio (see below), asking for a brief delay is usually fine.

Before a phone interview, it can also be worthwhile to suggest to an inquiring journalist that the conversation start with an email Q&A. This has several advantages:

- 1) You control your quotes to some extent; journalists otherwise rely on the notes they take during the conversation, in most cases, which can end up quite different from what you (thought you) said.
- 2) You have the opportunity to check facts and to think a bit about how to phrase things.
- 3) You may be able to give them some links that provide useful background.

It often turns out that an email exchange (typically involving a couple of steps back and forth) is all that the journalist needs. And for an on-air interview (live or edited), this kind of email exchange often helps to set the stage and makes the verbal discussion more productive.

And remember, of course, just because you might not personally read a publication does not mean that your contribution wouldn't be of value.

It's also good to mention any possible conflict of interest--for example, if you have co-authored with the person whose research you are discussing. Again, the journalist can decide how this information may affect how they choose to interview you, and what they can then do with your comment.

3.2 Do your homework

You've researched the journalist and/or media outlet, and the topic of conversation is one on which you are sufficiently confident you can offer an interesting and informed comment. Now, if possible, take a bit of time to do some preparation before you chat.

To begin, try to crystallize the key point(s) you want to make into a sentence or two, presented in accessible language. In other words, come up with some sound bites that you want to make sure you get into the interview to capture your main points. You can spin almost any question toward these succinct points you have prepared. At the most, you want to introduce only one or two technical terms in a long interview, so think about how you'll explain complex phenomena in plain language.

Second, come up with good examples. If the topic is lexical or phonetic variation, for instance, see if you can find some accessible, engaging examples of the pattern in question. Specific examples can be a great way to explain a complicated phenomenon of language variation or change, language bias, etc.

Third, get all your facts straight. Take notes and have the relevant statistics, dates, and names in front of you. If the topic is endangered languages, remember to check that you can actually pronounce the language names you've been reading about for so long. And, of course, be sure you can pronounce your colleagues' names if you are going to cite their work.

Fourth, let your presence as a researcher be part of the story, if relevant. If the research is your own, think about giving some context to the motivation for your work. If you have a good (succinct) story about an experience teaching this material or encountering a language

phenomenon in the world, consider whether this will help make the points you want to make in the interview.

Fifth, point the journalist to useful resources, if relevant. If you think the Wikipedia page for the topic is pretty good, or you know of another good online story or resource (such as DARE or COCA), feel free to suggest these to the journalist.

Finally, keep in mind the nature of the medium while prepping. If you're speaking about 'vocal fry' in a print interview, you'll have to describe vocal fry as a phenomenon, but if it's a radio or TV interview, nothing may be more helpful than the ability to fry on demand. Perhaps you're going to do a radio interview about sign languages: how are you going to explain a sign using only words? Prepping for unique situations like these can be challenging, but they also give us the chance to think about the work we do in novel ways.

4. Different media formats

The sections below cover aspects of interviews specific to different types of news media. Though there are some similarities across various types of media, each medium has its own unique features worth keeping in mind.

4.1 Publications

The majority of media requests tend to be for written media, either print or online. In some ways, these can be easier than radio or television interviews because the pressure of speaking 'live' is removed. At the same time, the journalist is a more active filter of what you say, if you do the interview over the phone rather than over email, which can work more than one way.

As mentioned earlier, these journalists often work on very tight deadlines, so if you receive a request, it's good to respond as soon as possible (even if it is just to decline the request). If the interview request is for expert comment on a currently popular topic, it is possible that they will be happy with a short, considered statement about your take on the work, especially if you can provide a counterpoint to the general discussion. Otherwise, it's likely that they will request more time and want more detail.

Some journalists prefer to do interviews via telephone or in person, so they can ask questions or seek clarification as they talk to you. They should inform you if they are recording the interview-- many do to allow them to take more general notes and ask questions. Journalists may only inform you partway through the interview that they are recording, so if you're worried about this then ask at the start. But it's best always to treat a conversation in this kind of interview as though it's recorded.

Other journalists may be happy to correspond via email – especially if they just want a short take on the topic at hand. If you're more comfortable with this, you can always say so and let them decide if they are happy to work via email. Journalists often prefer an interview via phone over email to capture an interviewee's more "natural" speech style, and a phone chat makes it

easier to follow-up on specific comments. On the other hand, an interview via email gives the interviewee time to collect their thoughts and provide a detailed answer.

If there's something you forgot to say in an oral or written chat, you can always email the reporter as soon as possible to clarify.

4.2 Radio

Radio requests aren't quite as common, but are certainly not unheard of. You may find that you will get requests on a particularly popular story (e.g., an article about a hot button topic, or launch of high profile research) as radio producers try and fill the voracious chat cycle.

Most radio shows are now also posted online for streaming or as a podcast afterwards. You should check whether this is the case, and ask for a link, which can be a useful reference for future interviews.

Often you will be contacted via phone or email by the radio show's producer, rather than by the host directly. It's the producer's job to schedule possible interviews, plan the chat segments and line up expert commentators for the day's news. For an evening drive-time show the producer will often call between mid-morning and mid-afternoon, giving you a couple of hours to prep if you decide to accept.

Radio interviews are either live-to-air ("LTA") or pre-recorded ("pre-rec") and will be conducted over the phone or, less commonly, in the studio. For national networks, it is also possible the interview will be conducted in a studio over the line to the host in another city. People generally sound better in the studio than over the phone, so you may also prefer the studio option. For some live-to-air interviews they may ask you to come in if convenient, especially where the topic may lead to extended conversation. For geographically distant stations, or shows that only want a short comment, they will likely phone you.

If the interview is by phone, make sure you're somewhere quiet, your mobile is charged, and the signal is good. Some shows may request that you call in from a landline (to avoid any reception issues). Put a "do not disturb" sign on your door. Have written notes with you if there are figures or examples you feel you might forget. Have some water on hand.

If you're going into the studio, give yourself enough time – they'd rather have you ready than wondering where you are.

Radio stations are all more or less set up in the same way. There are panels where different audio channels are controlled, and microphones and headphones for people to speak. If you are in a studio, or interviewed by someone who comes to you with their own recorder, the microphone will most likely be "carotid," which means you have to sit only a few finger spans from it for it to pick up your voice clearly. It will also pick up the sound of a dry mouth, so always ask for some water (and drink it a foot or further from the mic).

You will most likely do a sound check before the interview. If they have headphones available, it's a good idea to wear them (and necessary if there are people calling in). You'll be able to hear if fidgeting is audible, and you'll be more easily able to hear when the mics go live at the end of a song or advertisement.

4.3 Television

It is much less likely that you will be asked to do a television interview, but they're worth keeping in mind. Many of the same features of radio interviews apply; there are live-to-air and pre-record, studio and location interviews.

If you're being asked to come into the studio, or the interview is onsite for something like a feature documentary, ask whether they will have makeup services available (it can help get rid of any "shine" on our faces, among other things). For most interviews, dress up about as much as you would for a job interview or for teaching. Avoid patterned tops and go for something relatively neutral. Ask if they have any colors they would like you to avoid – your fabulous blue tie might disappear into the studio screen.

Television interviews will most likely involve small lavalier mics that clip onto your lapel, with a cable that will run down the inside or outside of your shirt (or, less often, are wireless). Make sure you turn up when they ask so they can set up the recording equipment and check you're good to go.

If the interviewers are coming to you, think of a couple of possible places to shoot the interview (your office? a meeting room? a garden?). The camera crew will tell you quickly enough if the location will be no good. You can also get in touch with your employer's press office (where applicable). Odds are they'll be interested in knowing that a television crew is on-site and may be able to help with a variety of tasks.

Increasingly, 24-hour news shows are relying on webcams for expert interviews. If you are asked to do a television interview from the comfort of your own laptop web camera, take some time to think about framing the shot. No one, least of all you, wants to see up your nostrils on national television. Put your computer on some books to raise the camera angle, make sure the lights are OK, and clear away some of the half-finished reading and student assignments. If you feel your internet connection will not be robust enough, you may want to consider not accepting the request. (As in print and radio interviews, your contact will greatly appreciate suggestions for other people they may want to interview.)

4.4 Social media

Increasingly, podcasts, online videos, and blogs are becoming a primary source of news, and they represent a great opportunity for connecting to new audiences. For many of these, the same rules apply as to traditional print media in terms of preparation; however, remember there may not always be the same level of editorial scrutiny as there is in traditional media.

Some social media offer an even more direct way to connect with an audience. You may be invited by a Reddit sub-thread to do an AMA (“ask me anything”) about your research, participate in a video interview for YouTube, or be invited to participate in a Twitter hashtag discussion about research relevant to your area.

If you’re not familiar with the format, you can always find out more, or decline the offer, but often social media is a great way to find your professional-but-publicly-engaging media voice about your research before talking to journalists in other venues. Content for these online outlets tends to attract more linguists than average, including many keen students, so find out from the host if you can use a little bit more technical terminology, or bring some extra complexity into the discussion.

5. General advice

The sections below outline advice relevant to all media platforms, particularly for when things don’t necessarily go to plan.

5.1 When an interview goes off topic

Sometimes during an interview, you may find that what you were told was going to be the topic goes a little off track. This is particularly true of discussions about current lexical innovations, which can often result in the conversation veering into complaining about “kids these days”--or perhaps the discussion of lexicon suddenly becomes one of accents that you haven’t prepped for.

If this happens, don’t get flustered. For the first scenario, it’s good to have a line in your head about, for example, how people have been complaining about “kids these days” since earliest record and/or about your perspective on language change. The second scenario is a good opportunity to discuss that there are many features of language and some researchers are experts in some areas and not others (although as a well-trained linguist you’ll probably find that you still have something you can say on that topic). If it’s a radio interview (especially live to air) this can feel painful, but if it’s for an article it is likely it will be edited out.

The more that journalists interact with linguists, the more they will understand the field. A journalist who is better informed about linguistics becomes a better conduit of information for the general public, so sometimes doing a bit of contextualizing, or giving some general information, can help both for the specific interview and for the future.

You can request to go “off the record.” Journalists will assume you’re on record unless you specifically say you’re not, but it is possible to request that a particular remark not be quoted.

Finally, don’t be afraid to say you don’t know, or that something is outside your area of expertise. It’s better to say that, and offer to look into it and get back to the person, than to say something off the top of your head you might regret.

5.2 When you feel like you're being asked to say things you don't want to say

If you feel that an interviewer is pushing you to fit their own agenda, or fishing for a certain quote (e.g., "So you think that kids who use abbreviations in text messages are ruining English, yeah?"), it is okay to be firm with them on what you will or will not say – and give reasons for this.

Sometimes a journalist may raise a controversial issue that you do not feel prepared to discuss. In an interview for the radio or for print, you can redirect with a line such as, "That is a very important and complex issue, more complex than we can do justice to here. But if we return to the question you asked earlier..."

Sometimes you may feel that an interviewer is asking you to repeat a thing you've already talked about in an email conversation or in the pre-interview. It can feel weird answering questions you know they already know the answer to, but remember they're asking for the audience who hasn't heard it yet. It can take a little while to get used to answering the same question multiple times, but if you give the same answer as earlier, it will make the interview easier for everyone.

If you are concerned that a journalist may misrepresent you, you may wish to request a copy of the full interview transcript or recording. If you feel a journalist has misrepresented you in a published piece, contact your university or employer's press office (where applicable), and contact their editor at the organization that has produced the work.

5.3 Student journalists

If you work at a university with a good quality student paper, radio station, and/or journalism school, you might find that you are occasionally contacted by student journalists. Everything discussed above applies in this case, too; however, they may not have their end of the routine down pat yet.

Although it may not have the same audience and prestige to be interviewed by the university magazine as the *New York Times*, it is still a good opportunity for you to reach an important local audience and practice your media skills. It is also a great opportunity to show student journalists that academics are engaged and informed commentators.

5.4 Feedback and record-keeping

It can be beneficial to ask people for feedback. Get a friend to record your radio interview and/or review the podcast of your interview with an experienced colleague or friend. How were your sound bites working? Where could you have redirected more effectively? Do you have any discourse markers that you use a lot? Radio "airchecks" are common for media personnel, where someone will offer constructive feedback on how you sounded. Very few people are innately good at radio; they learn it like any other skill.

For your own records, keep links to any interviews or online articles, as well as copies of any articles with your quotes in them. These are an important record for the "service" part of your

CV. They also can be a valuable addition to your website to show journalists your previous work with news media. Your press office may also have their own media monitors who will keep records of your media appearances (especially when your university affiliation is mentioned).

6. More resources

Below are some links to materials about presenting linguistics for general audiences. Please let the LSA know of any others you would like to see added.

- Advice for writing pop linguistics articles
<http://allthingslinguistic.com/post/97519333897/advice-for-writing-pop-linguistics-articles>
- Differences between pop linguistics, teaching, and even other pop science
<http://allthingslinguistic.com/post/111222806259/differences-between-pop-linguistics-teaching-and>
- Linguists and journalists can be friends!
<http://www.superlinguo.com/post/110748040035/linguists-and-journalists-can-be-friends>

LSA Resources:

- Media Experts List (<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/media-experts>)
- Archive of News Releases
<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/news/2012/09/21/linguistics-news-archive-jan-2003-sep-2012>
- Archive of News Items
http://www.linguisticsociety.org/archive/linguistics_in_the_news
http://www.linguisticsociety.org/archive/lsa_news
- Public Outreach Guide
(<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/lsaguidetopublicoutreach>)

Other resources relating to communicating about science to a lay audience:

- Communicating Science News: A Guide for Public Information Officers, Scientists and Physicians (<https://www.nasw.org/csn/>)
- The Science Media Centre
<http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/publications/publications-for-scientists/>
- A Scientist's Guide to Talking with the Media
<http://www.ucsus.org/our-work/ucs-publications/scientists-guide-talking-media#.VnGQ9ko4FD8>
- A Scientist's Guide To Social Media
http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2014_02_28/science.opms.r1400141

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