HOW DID (AMERICAN) WOMEN LINGUISTS BECOME WOMEN IN LINGUISTICS?

Note  The following text is intended to be read alongside slides 1 through 52, which formed the visual part of my presentation at LSA / NAAHoLS 2014. Numbers in the left margin of this text are keyed to specific slides; each slide is numbered in the lower left-hand corner. A handout accompanied the presentation, comprising a bibliography that includes my sources. That handout is attached at the end of this text.

1  [Title slide]
Many presenters at this birthday symposium have remarked on striking continuities in their topic across the 90-year interval of the existence of the Linguistic Society of America. However, when we look at the status of women as participants in the Society over the course of its life to date, we can see massive, deeply significant, changes—changes that have influenced the complexion of the study of linguistics in the US.

2  My presentation comprises five parts:
First, I will look at the status of women in the study of language before the foundation of the LSA.
Second, I will narrate the story of women in the early years of the Society.
Then I will trace how women’s role in the LSA shifted from the mid to late 20th century.
I will finish by speculating about the effects on the LSA overall of the changing status of women members.

3  [Gender & linguistics before 1924]
It is useful to start before 1924, because doing so may help contextualize Leonard Bloomfield’s identification of linguistics as a science, since setting the study of language apart from philology, Classics, and the study of literature was one of Bloomfield’s prime motivations in founding the LSA.

4  I am drawing here on Phillips’ (1990) *The Scientific Lady: A Social History of Women’s Scientific Interests 1520–1918*, which looks back to the 17th through 19th centuries, emphasizing the growth of the sciences in the UK and western Europe. Granted that only a tiny percentage of the population of the Euro-American world had access to education, it is striking that as the sciences emerged in their early modern forms, their study was associated with women. The rationale was what
Science was considered a very practical kind of knowledge, viewed by many as essentially menial, trivial, purely pragmatic—and therefore as an appropriate object of study by women.

Only a very few women became innovators or leaders in the sciences, but among those who had the leisure for self-cultivation, many took up the study of physics, botany, chemistry, astronomy, and mathematics—all fields viewed as not too taxing, therefore approachable by (what was assumed to be) women’s inferior intellects. As one commentator put it, the kitchen is not unlike the laboratory. Phillips recounts the fact that women in the UK who exhibited what we would now identify as depression would sometimes be advised to take up the study of chemistry as a means of dealing with their symptoms.

On the other hand, Classics and philology, the forerunners of linguistics, were closed to women, because these fields of study were deemed too deep, too challenging, and emblematic of high social-class standing.

But then from the 1860s, women began to be admitted to universities, and women’s colleges were set up. As a result, women flocked to the study of Classics and languages, abandoning the sciences.

Bloomfield was born in 1887, after the association of women with the sciences had been dismantled. So by 1924 the coast was cleared for him to conceptualize the study of language as a science, without appearing to lower the dignity of his initiative. Bloomfield’s famous essay ‘Why linguistic society?’, published as the first contribution to the first issue of Language, emphasized his drive to establish a scientific basis for the study of language in the US.

[Experiences of women members in the early days of the LSA]

These facts from the 17th through 19th century provide background for examining the role of gender in the early LSA.

A first point to note is that women were present from the very beginning of the LSA. These pages (see slide) display a sample of the list of the ‘Foundation Members’ of the LSA, that is, those who stepped forward to join the Society and paid their dues before March 1925. Of 274 Foundation Members, 31 were women, making 11% of the group (Falk 1999:7).

Moreover, for an interval between 1934 and 1939, women were explicitly invited to join the Society. This slide reproduces the masthead page of Language for Volumes 10.1 through 15.1. It contains a text pointedly sanctioning women’s membership. This text disappeared in Volume 15.2 in a general re-design of the masthead, and never reappeared.

However, despite the presence of women in the early LSA, there is little evidence that women were valued as members, as opposed to simply being tolerated.
Looking back on this era in 1986, Martin Joos (1986: 9) remarked offhand about the ‘routine ignoring of all female scholars’. The pioneering work of Julia Falk (1994, 1995, 1999) has probed this issue, bringing forth considerable evidence of the disparagement and neglect of linguists who happened to be women. Among her evidence is the general absence of women in official roles within the Society. For example, no woman held any official position in the LSA for 10 of its first 20 years of existence; and in the first 59 years of the LSA, only three women held the office of President.

Lest these three first leaders be forgotten, let me remind you of them, and of their achievements:

- E. Adelaide Hahn was the first woman President of the LSA, and Professor of Greek and Latin at Hunter College. She faithfully attended LSA meeting, both the Annual (winter) Meeting and the Summer Institutes, for 40 years. Her scholarship focused on Latin syntax, and on Hittite.

- Seventeen years later, Mary R. Haas was elected the second President of the LSA. She had been a student of Bloomfield and Sapir at Chicago, and later, at Yale. Haas’ life and career and eventual professional triumphs make inspiring reading from any current graduate student who despairs of finding a tenure-track position in linguistics. She eventually spent 30 years teaching at the University of California at Berkeley, and was a strong influence on the study of Native American languages.

- Victoria A. Fromkin was the third female President of the LSA, and Professor of linguistics at UCLA. Fromkin was a guiding light to scholars who got a late start, as she returned to school to study linguistics as she approached 40. She published on speech errors, was involved in the linguistic study of the feral child Genie, and co-authored a wildly successful textbook.

Returning to the experiences of women in the early LSA, another facet of their under-representation in the Society is registered in the history of (co-)authorship of articles in *Language*. I tabulated the incidence of authorship of articles (including obituaries) in *Language*, by gender. I was unable to identify the gender of about 7% of authors. But over the first 40 years of publication of the journal, the rate of publication by women scholars is painfully low, averaging about 5% per volume, and hitting a nadir in the early 1960s. Since then the rate of women (co-)authors has gone up, but has only reached 50% in a single year, 2008—where, for Volume 84, the rate of female (co-)authorship rose to 51%.

Moreover, early publication in *Language* by women was centralized on the work of only three extraordinary scholars, who alone accounted for 60% of women’s authorship up to 1949: Presidents Hahn and Haas, and Edith F. Claflin (1875–1953), who taught Greek and Latin at the secondary level for most of her career. Claflin served on the LSA Executive Committee in 1943 but never held higher office.
Another witness to the low profile of women in the early LSA is registered in the fact that over the first 91 volumes of *Language*, only one book review appeared by a female reviewer. Composing a book review may not be a glamorous activity, but it is significant nonetheless since book reviews were invited rather than submitted. The evidence suggests that women were little invited to review books for *Language*.

What may be harder to quantify but, in the end, may be more consequential is the general treatment of women as ‘marked’ members of the LSA. Julia Falk’s work has documented how women’s professional achievements were frequently disregarded, marginalized, or co-opted by men in the early days of the LSA. I would add to Falk’s discussion some evidence from the ‘Notes & Personalia’ section of *Language*. From the first volumes of *Language* up until around 1940 (when its contents shifted), this section of the journal informally recorded news of members’ achievements, appointments, honors, retirements, and so forth. But mention of women under ‘Notes & Personalia’ is very sparse, making up only 9% of the individual scholars cited by name up to the year 1940. In addition, there is a kind of symbolic evidence for the markedness of women members of the LSA encoded in the address forms used to refer to them in official LSA publications...

....in the 1920s *Language* often published lists of attendees or participants in meetings. Notice how in these samples (see slide) the names of women are characteristically entered in ways that provide personal reference to them, often including their full first names and marital titles. In contrast, men’s names are typically (if not uniformly) registered with more professional reserve, with initials attached to the surname.

To summarize, although women participated in the LSA from its inception, their presence seemed unintegrated into the Society in general. As I researched the history of the LSA into the middle of century, I encountered surprising material on two counts.

First, I had expected to find that in the post-war years women took on more responsibility, and began to have more opportunities. It is difficult to find data specifically about female linguists, but the evidence in general was that this was a period of decline for women’s intellectual independence, as documented in a detailed, 3-volume study by Margaret Rossiter of women scientists in America.

Decline was recorded not just in the sciences, but also in the incidence of women with PhDs in teaching positions across the disciplines. This graph, derived from data in Pollard (1977: 188), shows a decrease in the proportion of women with PhDs teaching in all fields that began before the war years. That decline was interrupted between 1942 and 1946, but the rate of decline increased sharply after...
World War II, as men were prioritized for faculty appointments—even at women’s colleges

24 Rossiter (1995: 34) adds to these data with a graph that records the numbers of doctorates awarded to men versus women, conflating the fields of engineering (conventionally dominated by men) with the fields of psychology and anthropology (which were more open to women). For men, there is a steep wartime drop between 1942 and 1946, but that drop does not advantage women. In fact, following a post-war recovery, there is almost a tripling of the gap between the numbers of PhDs awarded to men versus women between 1940 and 1960

25 Rossiter concludes that women were displaced out of the academic marketplace in the mid 20th century and discouraged from competing with men at all levels of education. This phenomenon shows up in the pages of Language in the low point of publication by women authors in the early 1960s

26 A second surprise in my investigation of the status of women linguists in the middle of the 20th century was the discovery that there was one niche in the field where women’s contributions more closely approached parity. That niche is within the Summer Institute of Linguistics, now renamed ‘SIL International’. This group, now highly controversial within linguistics at large, was founded in 1934 to train missionaries in linguistics. SIL members are then dispatched to do lengthy fieldwork among speakers of little-studied languages, so that eventually they can translate the Christian Bible into their hosts’ own languages

27 The first SIL training program was only open to men, but women were soon included. By 1943, the majority of the ninth graduating class comprised women (Thomas 2011)

28 By 1959, 9 SIL members had earned PhDs in linguistics from US universities. Of those 9, 3 were women

29 The numbers are still very small, but they seem to imply that SIL valued and supported women’s intellectual development at a time when only 1 in 6 PhDs went to women

30 Moreover, SIL affiliates published in mainstream linguistics journals, including Language. From 1944 to 1970, 12 out of 36 (30%) of articles generated by SIL affiliated are attributable to women. These 12 authors helped prevent the rate of publication in Language by women from going completely flat in the 1950s and 1960s

31 These are some of the titles of mid-century in Language by women SIL members. It was a surprise to me to find that this group apparently went against the grain to accept and to appreciate women’s contributions to the study of language
I would close by mentioning a scholar worthy of future study, Mary Richie Key (1924–2003). Richie Key was born the same year as the LSA; she spent 20 years as an SIL member doing fieldwork on indigenous languages in Mexico and Bolivia. On returning to the US, she earned a doctorate in linguistics from the University of Texas. From 1966 until her retirement, she taught at the University of California at Irvine, during which interval her scholarly interests shifted to kinesics and non-verbal communication, and eventually to language and gender studies. Her 1975 book, *Male / Female Language* was a pioneer in the field. It was reprinted in 1996. Richie Key’s life spanned almost the full history of the LSA. The evolution of her interests suggest that she was a transitional figure whose experiences mark a bridge from the middle of the 20th century to the present day.

[Late 20th-century feminist self-consciousness in the LSA]
Turning to the end of the 20th century, large-scale cultural-political changes induced many American women to become more self-conscious of their personal and professional roles. Women affiliated with the LSA brought those forces to bear on their participation in the Society.

To view the fuller context around how this happened within the LSA, it is useful to compare notes with a sister society, the American Historical Association (AHA). In 1970, the AHA set up a committee charged with gathering two kinds of data: data about women versus men in faculty appointments; and data about the experiences of gender bias faced by graduate students in the field of history. Simultaneously, the LSA took up exactly those same topics within linguistics.

The AHA’s committee presented its findings to the membership in 1970, in the ‘Rose Report’, named for the committee Chair, Willie Lee Rose. Meanwhile, women in the LSA were organizing and moving forward on the basis of the data they had collected, first under the guise of the ‘Women’s Organizing Committee’, then the ‘Women’s Caucus’, then finally in 1974 under the name of the ‘Committee on the Status of Women in Linguistics’, or ‘COSWL’ (see Thomas 2008).

In the 1970s, COSWL surveyed the distribution of male versus female linguists in US colleges and universities; established a Grievance Committee which addressed particular instances of gender bias in the profession that members brought forward; and started collecting a bibliography of publications of language and gender.

In the 1980s, the group continued to document and redress gender-based inequities and the treatment of women in the discipline. Three women were elected to the office of President in the 1980s. COSWL continued to survey the membership of the LSA and of departments of linguistics; sponsored symposium at the Annual Meeting celebrating women linguists’ achievements; wrote up a set of *Guidelines for Non-Sexist Usage* in professional writing; began to hold meetings and workshops to mentor graduate students, first focusing on women, but open to male graduate students as well.
In the 1990s the attention of COSWL members shifted to calling attention to the contributions of women linguistics, and to creating new ways to support students entering the field, especially by the development of ‘WILMA’, the online ‘Women in Linguistics Mentoring Alliance’. COSWL also looked into the intersection of linguistics and gender studies in a panel on ‘Language and sexual harassment’, and publicized non-traditional career paths followed by some women linguists.

Bringing the story up to the present day, during the 2000s and 2010s (to date), COSWL has collaborated on many projects over the years, the common denominators being to call attention to the participation of women in the profession, to support their continued involvement, and to work to ensure their fair treatment.

Returning to the comparison of the rise of feminist self-consciousness in the AHA versus the LSA, it is instructive to look back at the recommendations made in 1970 by the AHA’s Rose Report. There were four specific recommendations. In linguistics as well, all four have been topics of concern and action, and COSWL—in addition to other LSA members—has taken action to address each one.

[What have been the consequences for the LSA of the drive for gender equality?]

In 2010, the AHA published a document that looked back on the Rose report after 40 years.

In retrospect, the AHA found evidence that groundswell efforts to remove artificial obstacles placed before women historians had met with some success. Within the LSA as well, I think there grounds for satisfaction as well. The LSA has changed in its hospitality to women scholars, and changed radically, since its early days. That change benefits all linguists. But the AHA still felt there is work to do, especially with combatting ethnic and racial underrepresentation within the discipline, and in redressing the salaries of women scholars of advanced rank. The findings of the LSA’s Committee on Ethnic Diversity in Linguistics, and COSWL’s many surveys (posted on the LSA’s website), indicate that precisely these challenges face our discipline as well.

More specific to the field of linguistics, I would add two additional consequences of changes in the status of women. The self-identification of ‘women linguists’ as ‘women in linguistics’ has led to more attention being paid overall to the needs and interest of the next generation of professionals. Since its formation, COSWL has defined and spearheaded several initiatives that subsequently found their own independent footing within the LSA. I believe that COSWL members, and the activities of the group, cleared the way for the formation of the Committee on Ethnic Diversity in Linguistics; the Women in Linguistics Mentoring Alliance; and the Committee on Student Issues and Concerns. For
example, this list of the ‘Responsibilities of COSIAC’ reveals that many of these items were first goals pursued—and some achieved—by COSWL.

49 A second consequence that I believe follows from the greater self-consciousness of women linguists is that the LSA has publically defined its stance in ways that accept responsibility for its own institutional power. A number of documents that the LSA has made public, and which stake out its priorities, began with the activities of COSWL. These include the series of COSWL-produced surveys that have tracked hiring and promotion practices; the LSA’s statement on sexual harassment; and the Guidelines for Non-Sexist Usage.

50 Returning a final time to the AHA’s Rose Report, the 1970 text asserted that the problems facing women in the field reflect those of historians in general, and that their resolution would improve the atmosphere to all. I believe that in linguistics we have made significant progress toward the achievement of that goal, even if it is not wholly realized—and that...

51 ...(to embellish on the Rose report) ‘Our profession [HAS BEEN] strengthened to the extent that its practices are recognized as equitable...and designed to encourage and develop the best talent available within out ranks’.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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