



Linguistic Society of America

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### MEDIA ADVISORY

For Immediate Release

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### **Linguists to Gather in Minneapolis for National Conference**

(Washington, DC) – Hundreds of linguistics scholars from across the U.S. and around the world will convene in Minneapolis, Minnesota for the 88th Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) this January. Members of the news media are invited to observe and report on the proceedings.

The meeting is scheduled for January 2-5, 2014, at the Minneapolis Hilton. The meeting provides a forum for the presentation of cutting-edge research focused on the scientific study of language. In addition to the LSA program, the meeting also features concurrent programs sponsored by the American Dialect Society, the American Name Society, the North American Association for the History of the Language Sciences, the Society for Pidgin and Creole Linguistics, the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas, and for the first time, The Association for Linguistic Evidence.

The meeting typically attracts more than 1,000 linguists who attend various sessions and workshops. Over 300 papers and 150 research posters have been approved for presentation at the meeting. For a detailed listing of all meeting sessions, please visit the LSA website: <http://www.linguisticsociety.org/node/2587/schedule>

#### Program Highlights

The LSA will observe its 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with a series of special organized sessions covering the history of the discipline of linguistics and the Society. The celebrations will also include a 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party, and the premier of a new video documenting the many personalities and events that have contributed to the vibrancy of linguistics over the years.

#### Research Highlights

The following sessions were identified by the LSA Program and Public Relations Committees as newsworthy abstracts:

Title: *Mapping linguistic phenomena on Twitter and other "big data" sources*

Author: Gabriel Doyle

People can't stop talking on social media... but that's music to linguists' ears! We can take this idle chatter and use it to learn about the distribution of words, phrases, and grammatical forms throughout the country. New research by Gabriel Doyle at the University of California, San Diego, uses Twitter to generate maps of dialect features throughout the U.S., including the Southern forms "y'all" and the double modal "might could" and the Midwestern "needs done." This method also allows us to track geographic components of linguistic usage in near-real-time, showing how the use of the word 'raining' in tweets tracks neatly with major rainstorms.

Title: *Rhythmic differences in Black and White American Sign Language (ASL)*

Author: Diane K Brentari

Just as there are dialect differences between Standard American English and African American Vernacular English, there are differences in the standard variety of American Sign Language (ASL) and the one used by the African American Deaf community. In this study, the patterns of movement and pausing during third person narratives reveal a difference in the storytelling register of these two varieties of ASL. Older black signers (over age 55) were educated during the time of segregation while younger black signers (35 years or younger) went to school with white deaf children, so older and younger signers were included in our study. Black signers produced longer sign durations and longer pauses between signs; moreover, younger black signers have maintained and, in some cases, widened the differences between Black and White varieties of ASL, showing that Black ASL serves as a marker of cultural identity for this group even in the absence of the educational practices responsible for their initial separation.

Title: *Systematicity and Lifespan Change in the Regional Features of a Supreme Court Justice*

Author: Allison Shapp

Do people change their accents over time? A new study by linguists Allison Shapp, Nathan LaFave, and John Victor Singler of New York University suggests they do. The authors examined Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's speech during her long career. Ginsburg grew up in Brooklyn, an area characterized by the "raised" vowel in the first syllable of *coffee* and no /r/ sound in words like *court* and *lawyer*. The researchers studied Ginsburg's speech first when she was a lawyer before the Court in the 1970's and then when she was a Justice from 1993 to the present. They found that Ginsburg showed less use of New York features when she was a lawyer arguing cases before the Court than as a Justice on the Court. Moreover, the longer she sits on the Supreme Court, the more she returns to New York City features, in particular using less and less /r/ over time. This study supports an idea in sociolinguistics that in general people use forms with social prestige most often during the height of their working lives. Older people may shift to using more stigmatized forms either because they are retired and are no longer concerned with speaking "correctly" to impress others, or, as is likely the case with Ginsburg, have "made it" and no longer find such self-correction necessary in speech due to their personal prestige and self-confidence.

Title: *Recovering Voices at the Smithsonian: Communities + Collections + Research*

Author: Ruth Rouvier

There are between 6,000 and 7,000 languages spoken in the world today. Each of these languages, and the knowledge and cultural practices it contains, offers unique insights into the workings of the human mind and the ways in which people understand and interact with their social, cultural, and natural environments. The diversity of languages and systems of knowledge across cultures are central to what makes us human. Unfortunately, the number of speakers of many languages is falling sharply, as children cease to learn the languages of their parents and grandparents. Over half of these languages may cease to be spoken in this century. As they go silent, communities and scholars are at risk of losing a wealth of knowledge about history, culture, the natural environment, and the human mind. Through the Recovering Voices Program, the Smithsonian Institution supports language communities and scholars in their efforts to document, revitalize, and sustain languages and the knowledge embedded in them. Recovering Voices collaborates with communities and other organizations to improve access to data collections – ranging from those that record the details of the natural to the cultural worlds of peoples around the world. The program supports intergenerational, interdisciplinary, and community initiatives to sustain and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity.

Title: *Vowel change across Noam Chomsky's lifespan*

Author: Soohyun Kwon

Previous research on language change across the lifespan shows that most people rarely change their accent after the teenage years, although some speakers do show significant changes well into adulthood. A recent study by Soohyun Kwon at the University of Pennsylvania examining changes in Noam Chomsky's speech provides interesting evidence of significant accent change during adulthood. Chomsky was born in Philadelphia and moved to Boston at age 26. By comparing two recordings of Chomsky's public speeches from 1970 (at age 42) and 2009 (at age 81), it was found that over 40 years, Chomsky came to pronounce vowels in words such as *got*, *rock*, *top* more like *law*, *talk*, *caught*, which is characteristic of Bostonian speech. An examination of Chomsky's short-a vowel (e.g. *man*, *bad*, *glad*) shows that between 1970 and 2009, he adopted the Boston pattern, where this vowel becomes tense before nasal sounds (so *Ann* is pronounced like *lan*). These results are interpreted as Chomsky's adaptation to the dialect of Boston, which is interesting given the relative difficulty of changing one's accent in adulthood.

Title: *Linguistics meets "legalese": syntax, semantics, and jury instruction reform*

Author: Janet Randall

Before jurors deliberate a case, the judge reads them a set of "jury instructions." But these directives -- filled with "legalese" and technical courtroom jargon -- often confuse jurors and affect the verdicts that they reach. To tackle this problem, the Massachusetts Plain English Jury Instruction (PEJI) Project is investigating the linguistic causes of jurors' misunderstandings and so far, has identified two: undefined terms and passive verbs. We found that an instruction containing unfamiliar undefined terms:

*The **standard of proof** in a **civil case** is that a plaintiff must prove his or her case by a **preponderance of the evidence***

and a string of passive verbs:

*... A **preponderance of the evidence** is such evidence which, when **considered** and **compared** with any opposed to it, has more convincing force and produces in your minds a belief that **what is sought to be proved** is more probably true than not true. ...*

is harder to understand than one containing the same unfamiliar term -- but also its definition -- and no passives:

*After you hear all the evidence on both sides, if you find that **the greater weight of the evidence** -- also called "**the preponderance of the evidence**" -- is on the plaintiff's side, then you should decide in favor of the plaintiff.*

Identifying the factors that cause confusion will help us to revise legal language for better understanding, leading to more reliable verdicts and a fairer judicial system overall.

Title: *Lexical Stability and Kinship Patterns in Australian Languages*

Author: Claire Bower

Some words for family members do not change much. European words for 'mother,' 'father,' 'brother,' and 'sister,' for example, have mostly been inherited unchanged over several thousand years. Other kinship names, however, are less stable. English 'aunt,' for example, was borrowed from French about 1000 years ago, and the kinship categories themselves may also change over time. Old English, had two terms — 'faþu' or 'faþe' for paternal aunt and 'mōdrige' for maternal aunt — where Modern English has only 'aunt.' We have studied the stability of sibling terms in 190 Australian languages belonging to the Pama-Nyungan family. Our interests lie in how stable the names are (are they stable like English 'brother' and 'sister'?) and also in how stable the categories themselves are (do distinctions like the Old English words for maternal and paternal aunt come and go?). We studied how many distinctions speakers make between sibling types (for example, are there different terms for older and younger sisters and brothers), and if these distinctions are common across the languages. We found that while the kinship terms for siblings are not frequently borrowed, they are not historically old in the Pama-Nyungan family. Instead, speakers frequently recruit terms in other meanings to apply to kin. For example, words for younger siblings often come from words meaning 'rubbish' or 'worthless'. The kinship categories themselves are quite stable, however, implying that speakers recruit new words to describe existing kinship distinctions rather than innovating new ones. This work gives us an insight into how word meanings do (and don't) change over time, as well as differences in kinship names across the world.

Title: *The racialization of Basque: a result of language revitalization*

Author: Itxaso Rodriguez

Issues of language and identity are especially prominent when two ethnic groups are in contact, and even new identities may result from such highly symbolic events as the standardization of a language. These changes, however do not often come peacefully; they may result in new forms of self-identification as well as new identifications of "the other." This is true in the case of the Basque Country, a small region in the north of Spain and south of France, where tension

between the Basque and the surrounding cultures has been intense. A new form of the Standard Basque language was implemented in 1968 and led to a rapid revitalization of the language in the Spanish part of the Basque Country. People there started learning the new form of the language, but incorporated many linguistic elements from their dominant language, Spanish. As a result, many young people have disapproved of this variety of Basque, showing their disgust towards what they regard as an inauthentic variety of the language. In a recent study, a discussion with 8 young native speakers of Basque was recorded in which they discuss issues of language choices and identity. In this interview, they use different pronouns to refer to different types of Basque depending on their background and language use, and they mock those speakers whose Basque is heavily Spanish-accented, blaming them for inauthenticity. Ironically, however, they code-switch into Spanish to establish power. This research shows that nationalistic ideologies are still very strong among young people who extend their nationalism even into different types of Basque. This new perspective on language and identity is clearly a result of rejecting a newly established variety of their own language that they perceive as carrying too much of the surrounding, dominant Spanish culture.

Title: *Does knowledge of American Sign Language (ASL) vocabulary predict English reading ability for Deaf students?*

Author: Robert Hoffmeister

Researchers and educators have long understood the connection between vocabulary and reading ability in children who know one language. Only within the last thirty years, though, have researchers realized that the same holds true for children who are bilingual: the vocabulary of their first language can help with reading in their second language. We examined American Sign Language (ASL)-English bilingual deaf students to see if this connection between vocabulary and reading skills exists for them for a signed language and English print. Three different ASL vocabulary tests were given to the students and their results were compared with English reading scores from the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) standardized test. The results show strong relationships between ASL vocabulary knowledge and performance on the reading subtask of the MAP, thereby demonstrating that ASL vocabulary knowledge does indeed help deaf children decode and comprehend written English. Contrary to popular belief, learning ASL does not hinder deaf children from learning English; in fact, our work demonstrates that the opposite holds true.

### Awards, Honors and Related Events

In addition to the research and programmatic content presented, the meeting also features a number of awards, including the annual designation of the “Word of the Year” by the American Dialect Society, scheduled for Friday, January 3rd. Other LSA awards to be presented at a special ceremony on Saturday, January 4th at 5:30pm are the:

- Leonard Bloomfield Book Award: *Universals in Comparative Morphology: Suppletion, Superlatives and the Structure of Words* (MIT Press, 2012), authored by Johnathan Bobaljik (University of Connecticut).
- Victoria A. Fromkin Lifetime Service Award: Stephen Anderson (Yale University).
- Kenneth L. Hale Award: Claire Bower (Yale University).

- Early Career Award: Adrian Brasoveanu (University of California, Santa Cruz).
- Linguistics, Language and the Public Award: Donna Jo Napoli (Swarthmore College).
- Best Paper in Language 2013: "Toward a taxonomy of projective content," authored by Judith Tonhauser (Ohio State University), David Beaver (University of Texas at Austin), Craig Roberts (Ohio State University), and Mandy Simons (Carnegie Mellon University).
- Student Abstract Awards: 1st place, to Patrick Jones (Massachusetts Institute of Technology); 2nd place, to Matthew Faytak (University of California, Berkeley); 3rd place, to Hope E. Morgan (University of California, San Diego).

The LSA will also present the first ever **Excellence in Community Linguistics Award** to Mary Ann Metallic for her exemplary work to revitalize the Mi'gmaq language in her home community of Listuguj, Quebec.

Members of the Society who have made distinguished contributions to the discipline will be inducted as LSA Fellows during a ceremony at the Business Meeting, on Friday, January 3rd at 5:30pm. Those being inducted are: Hagit Borer (Queen Mary University of London); Wallace Chafe (University of California, Santa Barbara); Gennaro Chierchia (Harvard University); Lyn Frazier (University of Massachusetts, Amherst); Adele Goldberg (Princeton University); Beth Levin (Stanford University); Philip Rubin (Yale University); Don Winford (The Ohio State University).

Honorary members of the LSA will also be elected at the Business Meeting.

To obtain a press badge for the meeting, please contact Alyson Reed ([areed@lsadc.org](mailto:areed@lsadc.org))

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*The Linguistic Society of America is the largest national professional society representing the field of linguistics. Its mission is to advance the scientific study of language.*