



Linguistic Society of America

MEDIA ADVISORY

For Immediate Release

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**Linguists Gather in Nation’s Capital to Showcase Cutting-Edge Research**

(Washington, DC) – Research presentations on topics as diverse as Black language in the middle class, the documentation of signed languages, and the intersection between Haitian Creole and science education, are among the highlights of the upcoming Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), to be held virtually from January 6-9, 2022.

The 96th Annual Meeting of the LSA will attract over 1,000 linguistics scholars from across the US and around the world to a diverse array of online sessions. The meeting provides a forum for the presentation of cutting-edge research focused on the scientific study of language.

Members of the news media are invited to attend all or part of the meeting, which will be held virtually. Please contact Alyson Reed, Executive Director of the LSA ([areed@lsadc.org](mailto:areed@lsadc.org)) with any questions or to express your interest in attending. For more information, visit the Annual Meeting webpage at <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/event/lsa-2022-annual-meeting> or read through a selection of the meeting’s highlights below.

Research Highlights

Over 170 papers and 180 research posters will be presented at the 2022 Annual Meeting, including the studies featured below:

**Adjective Use Across Languages**

Zeinab Kachakeche, Richard Futrell, and Gregory Scontras

Imagine you are shopping for a ball as a gift for your child. As an English speaker, you might request from the store owner “the blue ball.” This is because in English, the adjective ‘blue’ comes before the noun ‘ball’. In some languages, however, adjectives come after the nouns they describe. For example, in Arabic the equivalent description is “the ball blue.” An interesting question arises here: does the position of the adjective before or after the noun affect how we refer to objects? If there is only one ball around, and it happens to be blue, then when an Arabic speaker says “the ball”, a listener might already know what object the speaker is referring to, without the need to mention any adjectives. However, in English, hearing “blue” could aid in the visual search for a blue object (the ball), even before hearing “ball”. In our study, we asked whether speakers of languages like Arabic use fewer adjectives than speakers of languages like English. We studied 74 languages, many of them unrelated, and found that the more often a language places adjectives before nouns (like in English), the more often the speakers of that language use adjectives overall. This result provides us with a concrete answer to the

relationship between adjective position and its use: placing adjectives before the nouns might carry an additional benefit in communication. It makes sense then that speakers of adjective-noun languages like English use adjectives more than speakers of Arabic-like languages. So, next time you go to a store or describe an object to someone, use your adjectives wisely!

### **The Emergence of Combinatorial Structure in Zinacantec Family Homesign**

Austin German

What does a brand-new language look like? This study was conducted in collaboration with three deaf siblings and their hearing family members from Zinacantán, an indigenous Mayan community of southern Mexico, who have jointly created their own sign language, Zinacantec Family Homesign (ZFHS). ZFHS began when the oldest deaf person in the family began to use gesture to communicate with her caregivers in the 1970s. When her younger deaf siblings were born, they learned their older sister's gesture system as a native language. The results of this study show that the signs of the oldest deaf person are structured like gesture or pantomime. By contrast, the signs of her younger siblings are structured like mature languages—whether spoken or signed. This study focused on how the signers represent events that involve motion, drawing on a corpus of signed narratives that contains about 700 descriptions of motion events. These results directly parallel the findings of previous research on Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL), which was famously created by deaf children who were brought together at school for the deaf in the 1970s. As new generations of children enrolled at the school and learned NSL, the grammar of the language became increasingly more complex (Senghas et al. 2004). However, while there are now thousands of NSL signers, ZFHS is used by only seven people. Thus, this study extends findings of NSL to a much smaller social group and demonstrates that a mere handful of individuals can rapidly innovate the creation of a new language.

### **Exploring Minoan Linear A Language and Culture through Mixed Methods**

Clelia LaMonica

The ancient Minoans of Bronze Age Greece left behind a legacy of cultural artifacts, palatial ruins, and a script that remains undeciphered to this day—Linear A. In recent years, geneticists, archaeologists, and linguists have worked independently to unravel the mysterious origins of these people. Recent digital advancements are now making it possible to combine our resources and analyze DNA, archaeological data, and linguistic features of the script to clarify the networks, contacts, and possible origins of these ancient people. We present the preliminary results of one such collaboration, which illustrates how mapping, statistical learning methods, and open digital datasets can pave the way for future interdisciplinary work to solve linguistic and cultural mysteries.

### **Grammatical markers of temporal event structure interact with real-world event knowledge during event comprehension**

Sarah Hye-yeon Lee and Elsi Kaiser

People know many things about how the world works. Although a rock might break if Wonder Woman throws it, in the real world a rock most likely won't break when someone throws it. But an egg is more likely to break when thrown. When reading about different situations, people need to create an image of these situations in their mind. Given that people have a lot of knowledge about how (un)likely different outcomes are, we asked how this knowledge impacts people's understanding of sentences: How strongly does our knowledge of the world constrain the images we create in our minds during reading? Our research reports that in addition to our world knowledge, linguistic information about situation type plays an important role. We compared what happens when people read sentences about

completed situations like “Kim *threw* the rock” and about ongoing situations like “Kim *was throwing* the rock.” When reading about a completed situation, people were more likely to imagine an intact rock and were therefore surprised to see an image of a broken rock. However, when reading about an ongoing situation, people did not have much of a preference for imagining an intact rock or a broken rock. Our results suggest that a robust relationship between world knowledge and different situation types (completed vs. ongoing, past vs. future) shapes the mental images we create based on what we read. Both linguistic knowledge and world knowledge are at play.

### **Investigating mock ethnic speech in internet memes**

Rexhina Ndoci

Internet memes have come to be one of the most powerful tools of our interactions in the online space. What happens, however, when they target socially vulnerable groups such as migrants? This study analyzed memes about the accented Greek of Albanians, who are the largest migrant group in Greece and have also been negatively stigmatized since their arrival in the country in the early 1990s. The findings show that the memes, through the anonymity the internet affords to their creators, reproduce and thus perpetuate the stigma surrounding Albanian migrants. The majority of the memes present Albanians as aggressive and criminal individuals while a small portion of them discusses what it means to be an Albanian (as in the love for Albanian foods) and what it means to be an Albanian in Greece (as in having to completely assimilate to the Greek culture and language), and an even smaller number of memes rejects the stigma (by directly criticizing it). Moreover, it is shown that the accented Greek attributed to migrants is not close to the authentic way Albanians who learned Greek as adults speak but is rather a mock approximation of it which works towards belittling migrants and thus elevating Greekness.

### **The Open Letter: Responses and Recommendations**

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

All across mainstream media and social media, people are talking about ‘cancel culture’. Linguists aren’t exempt from it either: last summer, an open letter about an LSA Fellow prompted discussions within linguistics about how the field is represented publicly. Unfortunately, these conversations were often reported outside the field as an attempt to ‘cancel’ the person in question. In this project, we use the tools of our linguistic profession—pragmatics and discourse analysis—to analyze the language of the narrative that came to dominate the media. We highlight some key ways in which this constructed narrative differs from reality, and the discourse tactics that made it successful. More specifically, we show how (1) claims that the letter was ‘rejected’ relied on statements that could be construed as true, but invited misleading inferences; (2) claims that support for the letter was insignificant belittled junior scholars, ignored the support of senior ones, and enabled personal attacks and threats of harm; and (3) metaphors of violence and allusions to authoritarian regimes, as well as constant claims of ‘cancel culture’, fabricated a sense of persecution. We also analyze the LSA’s and the field’s response to the letter and suggest how we, as a professional community, can move forward in ways that are more sensitive to power dynamics and can facilitate more voices being heard.

### **Linguistic training improves implicit learning**

Amber Lubera

People are obsessed with learning new languages, especially through apps like Duolingo. Interestingly, these apps don’t necessarily tell you what you are learning. Instead, they make language learning into a

game, where users acquire knowledge about language on the fly. But learning a new language actually requires you to rapidly detect patterns in the language, create generalizations, and apply this knowledge as you progress—and some patterns are notoriously difficult to learn. One type of difficult pattern is called vowel harmony. Briefly put, when parts of words like stems or suffixes are combined, sounds from one part can affect sounds in other parts, causing vowels in these parts to become more similar to each other when brought together. Even though Duolingo and other apps don't every explicitly teach these patterns, they are implicitly part of the language learning process. Which leads us to ask whether some learners are at an advantage when it comes to detecting these patterns. For example, are students of Linguistics, who are trained to detect patterns in language such as vowel harmony, better at rapidly acquiring and applying this implicit knowledge than others? We report on an experiment that shows that this is indeed the case. Follow up work currently in progress examines how much training is needed to induce a boost in performance.

A full schedule for the LSA Annual Meeting is available at:  
<https://www.linguisticsociety.org/node/36129/schedule>.

### Program Highlights

The 2022 meeting will also feature events of particular interest to the public and the news media:

- **Linguistics Day at the Planet Word Museum** – a special event for linguists to tour this new public space focused on language.
- **The Five-minute Linguist** – a public speaking event for linguists to “translate” their research into short presentations for a general audience.
- **Symposium on 50 Years of Black Language Study in the Chocolate City** (aka Washington, DC)

### Awards, Honors and Related Events

The LSA Annual 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 7th. The following awards will also be presented at a special ceremony on Saturday, January 8<sup>th</sup>:

- **Arnold Zwicky Award:** Kirby Conrod (Swarthmore College)
- **Best Paper in *Language* Award:** “Attracting Black students to linguistics through a Black-centered Introduction to Linguistics course” (Kendra Calhoun, Anne H. Charity Hudley, Mary Bucholtz, Jazmine Exford, and Brittney Johnson)
- **C.L. Baker Award:** Vera Gribanova (Stanford University)
- **Elizabeth Dayton Award:** Peter Torres (UC Davis)
- **Excellence in Community Linguistics Award:** Brenda McKenna and Cora McKenna
- **Early Career Awards:** Charles B. Chang (Boston University) and Amy Rose Deal (U.C. Berkeley)
- **Kenneth L. Hale Award:** Felicity Meakins (University of Queensland, Australia)
- **Linguistic Service Award:** Linguistics Beyond Academia Special Interest Group
- **Linguistics Journalism Award:** Allyson Waller (*The Texas Tribune*)
- **Linguistics, Language and the Public Award:** Robert Bayley (U.C. Davis), Joseph Hill (University of North Carolina, Greensboro), Carolyn McCaskill and Ceil Lucas (Gallaudet University)
- **Mentoring Award:** Richard Meier (University of Texas, Austin)
- **Morris Halle Memorial Award for Faculty Excellence in Phonology:** Juliet Stanton (New York University)
- **Victoria A. Fromkin Lifetime Service Award:** Joan Maling (Brandeis University)

- **Victoria A. Fromkin Memorial Prize for Student Excellence in Phonology:** Casey Ferarra (University of Chicago)
- **Student Abstract Awards:**
  - First Prize: Aron Finholt, University of Kansas for "States and Possession in Mashi: A Novel Argument for Decomposing *have*"
  - Second Prize: Josh Phillips, Yale University for "Cyclicality, narrativity and Djambarrpuyngu tense"
  - Third Prize: Caitlin Coons, University of Texas at Austin for "Relative Clause Typology Across Signed and Spoken Languages"

More information about LSA Honors and Awards can be found online:  
<http://www.linguisticsociety.org/about/who-we-are/lsa-awards>

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 7th at 6:00 pm. The following members will be inducted in this year's class:

- Robert Bayley (University of California, Davis)
- Diane Brentari (University of Chicago)
- Anne H. Charity Hudley (Stanford University)
- Beth Hume (The Ohio State University)
- Pauline Jacobson (Brown University)
- Laura A. Michaelis (University of Colorado Boulder)
- Natalie Schilling (Georgetown University)

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

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*Founded in 1924, 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.*