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This IS Linguistics: Scope, Positionality, and Graduate Apprenticeship when Diversifying the Linguistics Curriculum
11 September 2020
Linguistic Society of America webinar
Scoping the Scope: 
Revisiting the Aims and 
Paradigms of Linguistics

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Who am I?

• Sociocultural linguist (at least wearing that hat for the moment) born and raised in Prince George’s County, Maryland

• Emory University B.A. in Linguistics (w/minors in Anthropology and African American Studies)

• University of California, Santa Barbara, Linguistics M.A.

• Broad research interests extend to the linguistic construction and performance of race, gender, and sexuality
Why am I talking to you today?

• Speak to linguistics’ renewed “interest” in discussion of inclusion and diversity (i.e., challenging white supremacy) in the wake of national rebellion caused by police murdering Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery, among others

• Ask “why y’all doing this?”

• **Scope the scope of linguistics**

• “I am myself... a warrior poet doing my work – come to ask you, are you doing yours?” (Lorde 2007 [1984]: 41-42)
How I became a linguist

• Zora Neale Hurston and *Lactobacillus acidophilus*

  • “Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored.” (1928)

• FROYO!

• LING 101: History of the American Languages, taught by Susan Tamasi

  • A “dope” class
The Watershed Moment: 3 ways to speak English

Dr. Jamila Lyiscott, Assistant Professor of Social Justice Education, University of Massachusetts Amherst

6 So when my professor ask a question
7 And my answer is tainted with a connotation of urbanized suggestion
8 There’s no misdirected intention
9 Pay attention
10 Cause I’m “articulate”
11 So when my father asks, “What kinda ting is dis?”
12 My “articulate” answer never goes amiss
13 I say “father, this is the impending problem at hand”
14 And when I’m on the block I switch it up just because I can
15 So when my boy says, “What’s good wit you son?”
16 I just say, “tchwww I jus’ fall out wit dem people but I done!”

• Phonetics
• Phonology
• Syntax
• Pragmatics
• Embodiment
• Alliteration
• Pedagogy
• Geography
According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1986 [1915]:7) (via Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Roy Harris):
- “...of what use is linguistics?”
- “For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs.”
- “...no other subject has fostered more absurd notions, more prejudices, more illusions, or more fantasies...it is the primary task of the linguist to denounce them, and to eradicate them as completely as possible”

Nevertheless, Saussure is responsible in part for the embeddedness of white supremacy in linguistics
- “Only early Latin and early Greek ever had the primitive system preserved in Sanskrit” (2)

**Excavate the field to unearth that commitment to society outside of the ivory tower and expose the legacy of white supremacy** (See Foucault 1969)
Noam Chomsky, Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona

- Known globally primarily as a political activist and theorist
- Developed transformational grammar from a philosophical perspective
  - Studied at Harvard with philosophers Willard Van Orman Quine and J.L. Austin
  - First article published in *The Journal of Symbolic Logic*.
- Notion of the Language Acquisition Device developed as a challenge to the work of behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner
- Interdisciplinarity has always been at the core of linguistics
  - YES, even generativism 😊
Scoping the Intersections: Cases in Point

• Zora Neale Hurston
  -> Lorenzo Dow Turner
  -> Tracey Weldon, Associate Professor of English Language and Literature and Associate Dean at the University of South Carolina

  • e.g., Marianne Mithun, current Linguistic Society of America President and 1982-1985 American Anthropological Association Executive Committee Member

• Michael Tomassello (Psych dept.) & Debra Vidali (Anth dept.), among others, established the Program in Linguistics at Emory University
The Missteps

- Linguistics developed as a hodgepodge of “related fields,” (e.g., anthropology, psychology, philosophy)
  - It does not exist without disciplinarity
- Linguists continue to insist (though few would admit it) that clear borders separating the disciplines from other fields of study are a necessity
  - “That’s not linguistics” (See Jamaal Muwwakkil’s following presentation)
- It has largely ignored fields of study that historically encourage critical reflexivity on systems of power and oppression (e.g., Black/African American studies, feminist studies)
  - See LSA Statement on Race and “Toward Racial Justice in Linguistics” (Charity Hudley, Mallinson, & Bucholtz forthcoming)
- “Diverse” graduate students interested in language gravitate to those fields as more receptive to the work they find interesting
- Do you care who cares?
  - Current public engagement with linguistics focuses on contemporary language and sociopolitical issues, not morphosyntax, typology, et cetera (See “Why the term “BIPOC” is so complicated, explained by linguists,” Vox)
SURPRISE!

THAT IS (SOME OF) WHAT WHITE SUPREMACY IN LINGUISTICS LOOKS LIKE!
Moving Forward

• Is there any real value in holding on to a narrowed conception of what linguistics is?

• Open your mind to the possibilities

• Turn this microscope into a telescope

• “To infinity and beyond!”
  – Buzz Lightyear
Acknowledgements

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