Methods for Increasing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Linguistics Pedagogy

Nathan Sanders, Pocholo Umbal, and Lex Konnelly

University of Toronto

Linguists generally agree that all language varieties are valid, not just as objects of study within linguistics, but as ways of using language. However, this is not always reflected in how linguistics is taught and practiced. In addition to external pressures (such as requirements to evaluate and improve student proficiency in standardized written English), instructors themselves also often hold unconscious biases that may impact how they teach. Linguists can, and should, do better (see, for example, recent calls to action by Leonard 2018, Conrod 2019, and Charity Hudley 2020). In this talk, we describe the methods and preliminary outcomes of an ongoing project in which we address some of these biases, beginning with a few targeted linguistics courses at a large Canadian university and eventually expanding our scope to create materials that can be used at other institutions and even in other fields of study.

Language-related biases can be realized in the linguistics classroom in many ways. For example, linguistic data used as examples and for analysis often reinforce hierarchies and stereotypes related to gender and culture (Macaulay and Brice 1997, Pabst et al. 2018, Richy and Burnett 2019). These biases can also shape instructor-student interactions, which can affect the students' mental health and academic success. For example, common linguistic microaggressions such as mispronouncing a student's name (especially a minoritized student) or misgendering or deadnaming a trans/non-binary student can have severe detrimental effects on a student's emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Kohli and Solórzano 2012, Bucholtz 2016, Russell et al. 2018, Cochran 2019, McMaster 2020). Finally, these biases can alter the choice of content to be taught. For example, linguistics courses often present language and linguistic patterns with spoken language as the default, leaving students with little to no understanding of sign languages, sign language linguistics, or Deaf communities and issues.

We began a multi-year project in September 2019 to address some of these biases. In the first semester, we worked with two introductory undergraduate courses, one in phonetics and one in phonology; (we also worked with syntax and semantics courses in the second semester but faced various challenges that we discuss in out talk). We collaborated with each instructor to devise individualized approaches that suited their needs, while also satisfying the larger goals of the project. In the phonetics course, we expanded 3 units of the course material to bring an explicit focus on language-based bias itself as content to be learned. For example, we added discussion of (i) how recognition of gender diversity can problematize the notion of "typical male/female" vocal tracts; (ii) how social biases affect speech perception (especially for racialized groups); and (iii) how sign languages are often minimized or excluded in linguistics research and teaching. In the phonology course, we created new datasets from languages such as Cantonese, Sundanese, and Tagalog to replace data from standardized major European languages. We also created datasets demonstrating sociolinguistic variation and change in lesser-studied language varieties such as Faroese, Ganluo Ersu, and Toronto Heritage Russian.

We also organized workshops with instructors and teaching assistants to discuss best practices for teaching a diverse student body, with a focus on how to respect a student's gender, name, and linguistic background, especially with an eye towards empowering students as language experts. We are also constructing a database of names from a variety of languages and cultures, categorized by gender (masculine, feminine, non-binary), as a tool for helping instructors to more easily construct diverse and inclusive examples. Finally, as part of our evaluation of the effectiveness of the program, we plan to conduct student surveys in future years to compare outcomes across different types of courses.

In this talk, we intend to provide a model for how linguistics (and other) departments could adaptively implement similar initiatives, outlining our goals for the project and how we operationalized them in the context of our own undergraduate program. We will show that creating more affirming linguistics classrooms is not just imaginable – it's possible.

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