Article

Introduction: Language and Social Justice in Higher Education

Anne H. Charity Hudley[1] and Christine Mallinson[2]

Keywords

1. Introduction

The dynamics of educational inclusion and success are at the forefront of higher education, which faces the critical issues of promoting the inclusion and success of students from traditionally underrepresented groups and broadening participation among them in research and the professorate. In the past few years, students across the United States have organized protests requesting structural and inclusive changes from their universities, as outlined at theDemands.org (*WeTheProtesters* 2016). In addition, comments made about the academic abilities of African American students by the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in his remarks on the case of *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* compelled scholars to once again think about how questions of intelligence and access, particularly within institutions of higher education, are so deeply interwoven with ideas about race and language (for a summary, see Friedersdorf 2015). Moreover, within linguistics, concern about the need to develop a more inclusive and diverse scholarly community is becoming further salient as we confront the underrepresentation within our discipline of African American and Latinx students and faculty, as well as those from other traditionally underrepresented groups (Rickford 1997, 2014; Friedman & Reed 2014).

In recognition of these issues, all of the authors of the articles in this special issue posed the following questions to ourselves: What will we do in response to events of

[1]University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, USA
[2]University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD, USA

Corresponding Author:
Christine Mallinson, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250, USA.
Email: mallinson@umbc.edu

the past few years in higher education? What will we do individually? What will we do collectively? We maintain that applying linguistic insight is critical to addressing issues of underrepresentation, as we work to broaden participation both in linguistics and in higher education. We have to be sure that as linguists we are directly confronting issues of institutional and structural discrimination, not just in linguistics, but also in the institutions in which our departments and programs are housed. We must make sure that our linguistic actions (on individual as well as structural levels) match our sentiments, because inaction can be the same as negative action. This special issue is an accounting of some of the ways in which our work addresses concerns surrounding diversity and inclusion within linguistics and higher education and also provides a call to action for other linguists seeking to carry out such work on the campuses of their own colleges and universities.

2. Toward Greater Inclusion in Linguistics and Higher Education

In 2015, according to the Linguistic Society of America's (LSA) annual report, "The population of ethnic minorities with advanced degrees in linguistics is so low in the U.S. that none of the federal agencies report data for these groups" (LSA 2015a:16). As Rickford (1997) points out, one of the injustices within linguistics is the fact that our discipline has greatly benefited from the examination of the languages and cultures of populations that are underrepresented among linguistic scholars themselves. For instance, on the one hand, African Americans are greatly underrepresented in academia and in the students and faculty who are in linguistics departments. On the other hand, linguistic scholarship has disproportionately investigated African American English (AAE): as Schneider (1996:3) notes, more than five times as much research examines AAE than any other variety; more recently, in Rickford et al.'s (2012) topic-coded bibliographic volume on African American and other Vernacular Englishes in education, 861 entries concerned AAE, which is more than the entries for all other vernacular Englishes combined (John Rickford, personal communication, 1 March 2016). Given such scholarly discrepancies and disparities, it is incumbent upon linguists to pursue ways of addressing them, with a three-pronged approach—first, by increasing research on understudied varieties; second, by ensuring that students of color and students from diverse backgrounds can succeed in linguistics courses, in the major, in graduate school, and in the profession; and third, by ensuring that the vast majority of the diverse peoples whose language patterns are studied by linguists yet who do not end up in college (let alone in linguistics classes) nevertheless still benefit from our academic endeavors.

Work is being done in linguistics to address these issues on professional, institutional, and organizational levels. In their 2015 annual report, "The State of Linguistics in Higher Education," the LSA notes the rise in undergraduate degrees in linguistics: "The field of linguistics is growing most rapidly for undergraduates, with an increase of approximately 120 more students awarded BA degrees annually for the past 13

years" (LSA 2015a:5). Among programs offering linguistics who provided data to the LSA, the top three specializations besides General Linguistics are Applied Linguistics, Anthropological Linguistics, and Sociolinguistics for BA programs; Applied Linguistics, Language Acquisition, and Sociolinguistics for MA programs; and Syntax, Phonology, and Semantics for PhD programs (LSA 2015a:17). Alongside the growth in programs that specialize in areas that are applied and/or that engage with aspects of society and culture, linguists are becoming more concerned with how to engage not only with students but also members of the public who find themselves interested in the relationship of language to pressing social and cultural concerns. These goals also interrelate, as increased public engagement can also drive enrollment and support for linguistics programs. The LSA puts forward this argument in its "Outreach Guide," called "Taking Linguistics to the Public":

> When linguists reach out to the broader public (who are not currently enrolled at a college or university), it opens a window through which people can share in the fascination experienced by linguistics students and scholars. This outreach has the potential of generating broader public interest and support for linguistic research that can result in more students pursuing linguistics degrees and increased financial and institutional support for linguistics departments and programs. It can also lead to enhanced public support for government and privately funded linguistic research. It may also lead those in the private sector to gain a greater understanding of how linguistics research can be applied for practical purposes to everyday problems and challenges.
>
> Linguists who are visibly engaged in public-facing activities have found that it enhances their professional standing by drawing positive attention to the institution or organization they represent. Linguists who collaborate with colleagues that specialize in related fields, or as part of an institution-wide outreach initiative, also report enhanced appreciation and understanding about the value of linguistics research to the broader areas of scientific and humanistic inquiry. (LSA n.d.[b], paras. 4-5)

Along similar lines, the LSA has also compiled online resources that are not only designed to educate the general population about linguistics, but also to educate linguists about how to communicate about linguistics to the general public. In addition to a series of Frequently Asked Question pamphlets, the LSA has also put together a "Linguistics and the News Media" guide for linguists. As the guide states, "For many years, linguists have been concerned that we're not a visible or vocal enough part of public conversations about language. We have sometimes struggled to disseminate linguistically informed perspectives on relevant social and political issues, explain the importance of linguistic research, and/or share our enthusiasm about language science with a general audience" (LSA n.d.[a], para. 1).

In addition to the mass media, the LSA is concerned with the rise of new media, and as such provides suggestions for discussing language-related topics in that domain. The LSA is also increasingly using technology to disseminate information about linguistics in ways that are widely accessible to the public. In 2015, for instance, the LSA organized a webinar on Linguistics and Human Rights, in collaboration with the

American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science and Human Rights Coalition, and a recording of the webinar is available on YouTube (LSA 2015b). In 2016, the LSA was an exhibitor and official partner of the fourth USA Science & Engineering Festival held in Washington, D.C., at which "more than 350,000 K-12 students and parents, over 5,000 teachers and over 3,000 STEM professionals [experienced] the largest celebration of STEM, including the science of language" (LSA n.d.[c]). At a booth sponsored by the LSA, attendees were able to "get the chance to approach language like scientists and learn about the creative ways linguists study and describe how we communicate" (LSA n.d.[c]). Linguists and linguistics students served as volunteers, helping staff the booth and lead activities, including a "Do You Have an Accent?" activity, in which participants' vowels are measured and analyzed on the spot, thereby increasing public interest in and access to linguistic inquiry.

The theme of public engagement is also increasingly picked up in the realm of academic scholarship. One of the most prominent venues is the *Journal of English Linguistics*, with its popular "In the Profession" column. As Robin Queen and Anne Curzan stated when the feature was introduced, "We see this column as a resource for people working in all areas of linguistics, English language studies, and English linguistics. We hope that it inspires people to think about various aspects of the profession and opens up a venue for new voices and/or familiar voices speaking on new ideas" (Queen & Curzan 2006:166). For instance, Wolfram's (2012) "In the Profession" piece addresses the issue of connecting with the public. As he argues, "If linguists firmly believe that understanding the nature of language is central to understanding human cognition and behavior, then we owe it to the profession to have more of a presence in public life" (Wolfram 2012:111), and his column provides strategies for linguists for establishing their own public presence as linguists.

As Wolfram and others have asserted, linguists are well positioned to bring linguistics to bear on issues of critical importance to the public, and one of the most immediate and important avenues for us to do so is within the sphere of higher education. Yet, to date, linguists have done most work in educational engagement within the K-12 sphere (for a summary, see, e.g., Adger, Wolfram & Christian 2007). Similar attention has generally not been paid to colleges and universities—what Dunstan et al. (2015) and Dunstan et al. (this issue) refer to as our own "backyard." Students do not leave their language patterns behind when they graduate from high school, and, yet, there remains a lack of specialized understanding of how language variation affects teaching and learning in higher education. Research finds that professors can also hold negative linguistic attitudes that, students report, can compromise their confidence and sense of belonging on campus (Fama 2007; Dunstan 2013; Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2014), but little is known about these processes; indeed, sociolinguistic dynamics are ripe for exploration on college/university campuses. Further, unlike most K-12 settings, college and university professors have a high degree of sovereignty over their teaching, and individual faculty design courses and implement pedagogical techniques based on their own perspectives and experiences. To engage with the educational elite—the college/university students who will become future leaders and the faculty who educate them—is a critical mission, and one that is particularly relevant to students

from historically underrepresented groups, who often face myriad roadblocks and challenges on their paths to success in college. Linguists are well positioned to advance understanding of how linguistic and social factors interact in college/university contexts to perpetuate barriers but also promote pathways to achievement in higher education. If linguists seek to address linguistic bias and discrimination and thereby mitigate educational inequality—and by extension, future employment inequality and other inequalities in life chances and opportunities, then a framework of language and social justice must include higher education as well as K-12 students, educators, and schools.

On an individual level, linguists can easily develop projects and interventions that are suitable for and tailored to higher educational environments (e.g., sharing one's own research on a professional website, designing a course to carry out service-learning projects, etc.). In addition, faculty may focus on integrated interdisciplinary, interdepartmental, cross-college, campus-wide, and/or community-based or other public partnerships—in fact, Dunstan et al. (2015) argue that, in such formats, linguists' efforts may have the greatest utility for fostering change. Their "Campus Infusion Model," which is also highlighted in Dunstan et al.'s chapter in this issue, "highlights major organizational divisions on campus: student affairs, academic affairs, human resources, faculty affairs, and campus diversity [...] [which were selected] strategically in order to address the entire campus community" (Dunstan et al. 2015:273). The broad reach of this program has helped ensure its success, and the positive message about linguistic diversity has caught on around campus. In sum, "other institutions seeking to create similar programs must likewise be open to interdisciplinary, cross-organizational collaborations and be intentional in planning, seeking out, and gaining the support of leaders and key gatekeepers on campus" (Dunstan et al. 2015:278).

In 1916, Saussure remarked, "[O]f what use is linguistics? [...] In the lives of individuals and of societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other. For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs. In practice, the study of language is in some degree or other the concern of everyone" (trans. Harris 1986:7).[1] Linguists are well positioned to promote greater sharing of linguistic information across educational groups, across traditional borders, and with broad public audiences. We have a central role to play in building an educational climate in which faculty, staff, and administration work together to promote the success of culturally and linguistically diverse students in higher education and to bring about a more publicly engaged linguistics. We can also apply linguistic insights to help broaden participation and promote the excellence of students from traditionally underrepresented groups, both in linguistics and in higher education. Such endeavors dovetail with and reflect some of the most highly valued tenets in contemporary academic culture, including broader access to higher education, critical thinking, rigorous opportunities for learning, and commitment to free expression.

In addition, such efforts reflect a move within academic circles toward valuing and developing scholarship and intellectual traditions that are more publicly engaged and publicly oriented. Increasingly, faculty are being drawn to endeavors that connect the ivory tower to the public sphere. A recent study based on interviews with thirty-nine

faculty found that they desire "academic work that has relevance for public life" and that such work "improved student learning, increased productivity, [built] a sense of connection to campus and community [...], [and] a sense of meaning that makes work worthwhile" (Snyder-Hall 2015:30). Moreover, there recently have been calls across the social sciences for broader public engagement, by such organizations as the Social Science Research Council, as well as from the humanities. For instance, William D. Adams, Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, recently stated that "scholars need to re-engage in new ways in the public realm, writing work that is accessible to the public," in order to both sustain the future of disciplines in higher education and to vitally enrich the public sphere (Bosworth 2016). But as noted by the former president of the Social Science Research Council, Craig Calhoun, echoing work by anthropologist Charles R. Hale, doing publicly engaged scholarship should not simply be "a matter of publicity or reaching broader publics with a message from social science. It is *a way of doing social science*, often in collaboration with non-social scientists. [...] [It] is a matter of choosing important problems for research, not simply finding more effective means of communicating existing disciplinary knowledge (good though that may be)" (Calhoun 2008:xvii, emphasis added).

With these perspectives in mind, we invite other scholars to consider how they might explore similar problems, ask similar questions, and/or carry out similar projects on their own campuses that successfully integrate engagement into and beyond the traditional domains of teaching, research, and service. In the next section, we preview the papers in this special issue, noting common intellectual questions that guide these papers and identifying pathways that could be followed for other linguists seeking to carry out similar work at their own colleges and universities.

3. Five Models for Linguistics-Based University Engagement

The papers in this special issue highlight research-, teaching-, and program-based initiatives at five different universities as a means for modeling ways that linguists at diverse institutions can create similar programs and undertake similar endeavors as relevant to and situated within their own institutional settings. In broad perspective, each of these initiatives promotes awareness about language and the discipline of linguistics, celebrates linguistic diversity, and addresses issues of inclusion and equity in, on, and around diverse campus communities. Indeed, we note the diversity of the institutions at which these initiatives were carried out—three predominantly white institutions (Coastal Carolina University, the College of William & Mary, and North Carolina State University), one minority-serving institution (University of Maryland, Baltimore County), and one minority-serving/Hispanic-serving institution (Florida International University). Each school differs along various lines—for instance, location, size, curricular offerings, institutional resources, promotion and tenure criteria—but each values both teaching and research as part of their academic communities. Though the institutional contexts for readers will undoubtedly vary along similar and

additional lines, we envision that the papers in this special issue will nevertheless be able to exemplify some pathways whereby linguists can conceive of and foster the types of interdisciplinary, interdepartmental, cross-organizational, and community-based, or other public collaborations and partnerships that we discuss here.

In the first article, "Student Voice and Linguistic Identity: Digital Badging as a Tool for Retention of First Year and First Generation Undergraduates," Becky Childs describes how two initiatives—first, three learning modules that use an electronic badge system, and second, additional materials for student tutors at the university writing center—help retain first year and first generation college students and support linguistic diversity on campus.

Carrying forward the theme of supporting and retaining undergraduate students from underrepresented backgrounds, in the second article, "Engaging and Supporting Underrepresented Undergraduate Students in Linguistic Research and Across the University," Anne H. Charity Hudley describes her prior work as co-founder and director of the William & Mary Scholars Undergraduate Research Experience (WMSURE), a program designed to support underrepresented undergraduate students in research, at the College of William & Mary. Describing how a social justice-based commitment to culturally and linguistically diverse students is at the crux of this initiative, Charity Hudley connects efforts to promote the success of underrepresented students to broader endeavors to promote inclusive excellence both in linguistics and the academy. She illuminates how participation in both within-discipline as well as broader university-wide inclusion efforts are crucial for increasing participation in linguistics.

In the third article, "The Importance of Graduate Student Engagement in a Campus Language Diversity Initiative," Stephany Brett Dunstan, Amanda Eads, Audrey J. Jaeger, and Walt Wolfram expand upon the discussion of linguistics-centered programming for students by presenting "Educating the Educated," their campus-wide model for infusing linguistic diversity into the academic experience for undergraduate and graduate students. Having grown significantly over the past several years, the program now involves peer education primarily led by graduate students, who benefit personally, professionally, and academically from participating in these campus initiatives.

In the fourth article, "Technology-Enhanced Project-Based Learning: A Platform for Graduate Student Research and Outreach on Campus and in the Community," Christine Mallinson continues the focus on incorporating graduate students into outreach and engagement-based efforts with an overview of two technology-enhanced projects produced by her students: first, a set of four podcasts based on original research about language variation, and, second, a short film that highlighted linguistic diversity on campus. In addition to engaging students in direct academic research, the projects also raise awareness of linguistic issues on campus and among the broader public; Mallinson further notes that this type of community-facing work can be particularly appealing to and beneficial for graduate students from underrepresented backgrounds.

In the fifth and final paper, "Hispanic-Serving Institutions and Mass Media Engagement: Implications for Sociolinguistic Justice," Phillip M. Carter centers his scholarly engagement with the mass media through editorial writing and interviews as

a mechanism through which to educate the public about language-related issues pertinent to U.S. Latinx speech communities. Continuing with the theme of public engagement, and speaking directly to the specific goal of media engagement as set forth by the LSA, Carter's work provides a concrete example of how to formalize media engagement as a critical mechanism for outreach within the university context and with the broader public.

Taken together, these papers demonstrate three intersecting pathways whereby linguists can integrate research on language and social justice into the broader ecosystem of higher education and seek to bring about linguistic and educational change at various colleges and universities. First, course- and department-based initiatives can appeal to and promote the enrollment, retention, and success of traditionally underserved students—including African American, Southern American, Latinx students, first-generation and/or low-income students, students from rural areas, transfer and/or returning students, and so forth—both in and beyond Linguistics-related disciplines. Second, departmental, program-, and center-based endeavors are critical to promoting the ideals of linguistic and educational equity and inclusiveness on college and university campuses in ways that take into account the needs, experiences, and resources of specific student populations. The success of such endeavors relies upon having built partnerships in domains such as student retention and recruitment, program building, and media outreach. Third, technology and the media are important tools and platforms for linguistic engagement. While engaging the media and employing technology to do so is not a new strategy among linguists (for an overview, see Sclafani 2013 as well as the LSA "Linguistics and the News Media" guide), it has particular utility given linguists' position on college and university campuses, where technology tools are often readily available and where media engagement is often institutionally encouraged and well supported. By marshaling the media as a tool to combat damaging linguistic ideologies that disproportionately affect minority/first-generation/low-income students, linguists can have tremendous impact on and off campus.

Within this special issue, each paper speaks to the ways in which linguistic insight is critical to addressing issues of underrepresentation, broadening participation, and diverse student achievement, both within our own discipline and in higher education more generally. Linguists understand how communicative and cultural differences can be a major contributor to educational inequalities; in addition, linguistics lies at the intersection of the humanities, social sciences, and STEM sciences, which promotes interdisciplinary linkages. From this unique position, linguistic knowledge, insights, and research findings can be directly channeled into broader endeavors to promote linguistic awareness and educational equity in ways that can specifically address persistent educational inequalities that culturally and linguistically diverse students often face. Thus, we believe, based on our understandings of and insights into communication, culture, educational equity, and sociolinguistic justice, linguists are uniquely positioned to contribute to building diverse, accessible, and equitable university environments in ways that benefit linguistics as a discipline as well as higher education. To do so, however, requires that we as linguists adopt a comprehensive framework of language and social justice in higher education, rejecting disciplinary ideologies that

too narrowly prescribe what linguistics is or should be and who linguistics is for or should be for (Mallinson & Charity Hudley 2013). As is demonstrated throughout this special issue, with a definition of linguistics and language broadly conceived and maximally relevant, linguists can best position ourselves to speak to the concerns and challenges of the wider educational community.

Although the initiatives profiled in this special issue are centered on higher education, the principles apply broadly. Each contributor reveals how they are *doing* engaged linguistic work, undergirded by ethical, pedagogical, and community-based principles. Though the populations that each of us serves at our home institutions, the courses we teach, and the audiences we aspire to reach are varied, the common thread is a shared commitment to holding conversations about language in ways that seek to address socially and educationally relevant problems. Such work promotes a model of change through action—in which we move beyond constraining ideologies about what linguistics is and is not, or about what linguists do and do not do—in ways that bring a focus on educational and social justice to the forefront of engaged linguistic scholarship.

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Note

1.   We thank Walt Wolfram for bringing this quote to our attention.

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Author Biographies

Anne H. Charity Hudley is the North Hall Endowed Chair in the Linguistics of African America at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Director of Undergraduate Research for the College of Letters and Science; she is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA). She is the coauthor of three books: *The Indispensable Guide to Undergraduate Research: Success in and Beyond College*, *Understanding English Language Variation in U.S. Schools*, and *We Do Language: English Language Variation in the Secondary English Classroom*.

Christine Mallinson is Professor of Language, Literacy, and Culture, Affiliate Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, and Director of the Center for Social Science Scholarship at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). She is also chair of the Ethics committee of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA). Her interdisciplinary research focuses on the social, cultural, and educational contexts of English language variation in the United States. She is the coauthor of *Understanding English Language Variation in U.S. Schools* and *We Do Language: English Language Variation in the Secondary English Classroom* and coeditor of *Data Collection in Sociolinguistics: Methods and Applications*, 2nd edition.