Linguistic Anthropology 2000

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On behalf of the Committee on the State of the Profession of the Society for Linguistic Anthropology and at the behest of then SLA President Alessandro Duranti, I sent a survey to all departments of anthropology in Canada and the U.S. Lourdes de Leon and John Haviland are now surveying Mexican universities. My goal was to determine the position of linguistic anthropology in the discipline, hoping that this information would be useful to SLA and AAA, to institutions in curricular and hiring policies, and to linguistic anthropologists themselves. Our colleagues were generous with their time, and I received 150 completed questionnaires.

Five to ten years ago, many practitioners believed that linguistic anthropology was losing ground. Few jobs were opening—even in the face of retirements and departures—and anthropologists of other stripes often seemed to lack a sense of how linguistics was relevant to their concerns. The last few years, however, have witnessed a host of job opportunities in academic departments. This change seems to have resulted from new research agendas, including work on the place of language ideologies within historical as well as contemporary social, cultural and political economic processes, linguistic dimensions of state power and institutions, and the suppression of “minority” languages by the dominance of English and other “hegemonic” languages. At the same time, society has come to our assistance by making the case for the importance of linguistic inquiry to anthropology as official English legislation, the Ebonics controversy in Oakland, efforts to restrict bilingual education and other flash points have gained tremendous public visibility. As Past AAA President Jane Hill argued, language often emerges in such cases as a seemingly safe arena in which the politics of race can be debated.

Small But Strong

Although we lack comparable statistics for previous years, it is our impression that these developments have strengthened the intellectual and institutional place of linguistic anthropology in the discipline. But we can say with some degree of certainty that it is still, in quantitative terms, small. Whereas the mean faculty size for departments responding to the survey is 9.3, the mean number of anthropologists employed in these departments is only 0.66. Thus, whereas quite a number of departments lacked linguistic anthropologists and a few had as many as three faculty members specializing in this area, a common pattern for departments of moderate size is to employ one linguist. To the surprise of many practitioners, slightly more linguistic anthropologists (0.7) are employed in other departments and programs. Whereas the gender balance in departments of anthropology is skewed toward men (40.5% women, 59.5% men), the number of female and male linguistic anthropologists employed is virtually identical. The curricular picture is mixed. Fifty-five percent of anthropology departments require at least one course in linguistic anthropology, as opposed to 59% for social/cultural, 80.5% for archaeology, 73% for physical and 6% for applied anthropology. Very few students (4%) select a concentration in linguistic anthropology when one is available at the undergraduate level; the same percentage is reported at the graduate level. Forty percent of graduate programs require courses in linguistic anthropology.

Course Renovation

Linguistic anthropology is effectively sustaining the sense that it is a vital part of the discipline, and many anthropologists believe that linguistics should be represented on the faculty and in the curriculum. While linguistic anthropologists have recently demonstrated that their research can inform the central theoretical and empirical questions that engage the discipline as a whole, it...
appear that they need to review courses—particularly the introductory course in linguistic anthropology—to bring this message to the fore. General anthropology courses at the undergradu
ate and graduate levels and introductory textbooks similarly need to be reconfigured to incorporate up-to-date understandings of linguistic anthropology and the politics of language. This recommendation points to the larger need to take more active steps designed to change the public face of linguistic anthropology within the discipline. Because reading patterns are still shaped significantly by subdisciplinary boundaries, anthropologists in other areas are frequently unaware of changing epistemologies and practices within linguistic anthropology. Practitioners might thus be well-advised to organize a faculty seminar to discuss contemporary work in the field. By helping to coordinate departmental colloquia series, linguistic anthropologists can bring speakers in this area to campus. Giving a lecture or two in the department's introductory course also provides a means to shape student's perception of the field from the start. Assisting with the selection of readings on linguistics for introductory courses is also productive.

Support Systems
SLA and AAA might take concrete steps designed to support linguistic anthropologists, particularly at the junior level. The numbers suggest that many practitioners employed in academic settings—either within or outside anthropology departments—are all alone: they lack other members of the subfield on their campuses. This is true for many individuals as they take their first jobs. Mentoring can be difficult for potential candidates if senior faculty members are not conversant with research in linguistic anthropology. Accordingly, SLA might consider setting up an inter-institutional mentoring system to provide individuals willing to support a junior faculty member. Colleges and universities might fund a short visit to enable mentors to visit a junior faculty member's campuses, discuss curricular issues and research trajectories and, in the course of a public lecture or faculty seminar familiarize other faculty members with linguistic anthropology. Because this same structural problem often confronts physical anthropologists—and sometimes archaeologists—a similar mentoring program could be of value.

If more linguistic anthropologists teach outside departments of anthropology than within, it is extremely important for SLA to think about how it addresses the needs of these members. Both implicit and explicit exclusionary practices are sometimes built into communications from AAA and SLA, projecting implied disciplinary readers and thus bearing the message—"If you are not in a department of anthropology, this doesn't apply to you." We need more inclusive modes. Similarly, if the accepted model of the linguistic anthropologist is of a disciplinarily placed subject, we need to learn more about the position of practitioners who teach in linguistics, sociology, ethnic, cultural, American and women's studies, language departments and area studies programs. A questionnaire sent to SLA members might also be productive. Departments of anthropology could benefit by fostering relations with linguistic anthropologists who teach elsewhere on their campuses. It is also important to keep departments of linguistics informed about new developments in linguistic anthropology and to encourage them to support linguistic anthropologists on their campuses.

Despite recent gains, a substantial gap still separates the intellectual strength of linguistic anthropology in the discipline from its institutional status. I hope that this survey will stimulate conversations and interventions focused on bringing the two more closely into accord.

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Linguistic Anth 2000
Continued from page 33

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