

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

## Linguistic Anthropology in the Current Professional Market

Steven P Black

This essay discusses challenges faced by junior linguistic anthropologists in the current professional market, outlining developments that shaped these challenges and providing ideas about how to navigate this market. Linguistic anthropology is moving toward more collaboration and integration with cultural anthropology. I suggest that this, in conjunction with the current labor crisis in higher education, has forced junior scholars into difficult decisions about how to represent our work. I discuss the history of the subfield—how we got to where we are—and the stakes of collaboration in this historical context for those who seek employment amid a scarcity of tenure-track academic jobs.

### *A Brief History*

Linguistic anthropology is commonly known as one of four (sub)fields of anthropology. This reflects the creation of a discipline in which scholars were once expected to holistically engage with human language, culture, history and biology. Until the mid-20th century in the US, linguistics and anthropology were not clearly separated. Scholars including Boas, Sapir, Bloomfield, Kroeber and C Voeglin, were presidents of the Linguistics Society of America who contributed to both formalist research on language and anthropological theory. In the 1960s, an institutional fissure occurred in the US, catalyzed by Noam Chomsky's theory of generative grammar that focused on (mental) linguistic competence to the exclusion of performance (actual language use). This paradigm appealed to some because of its empiricist framing. Such appeal contributed to the establishment and expansion of linguistics departments.

Others created a theoretical and methodological framework known as the ethnography of communication. This framework examined language and its use in socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Despite this counter-development, in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, as linguistics departments grew, some anthropology departments reasoned that they no longer needed a linguist on faculty. The study of sociolinguistics, folklore, communication, conversation analysis, discourse analysis and pragmatics flourished, but often outside of anthropology departments. Scholars of language and culture developed theoretical standpoints for studying linguistic structure alongside embodied language use, metapragmatics and ideologies. These perspectives offer a lens through which much of culture can be viewed—after all, language is a primary medium for social life. Most contemporary anthropologists who study language and culture are not specifically linguists. Rather, we are people who study culture with a toolkit that includes a nuanced theory of how language works.

### *Collaboration in an Age of Professional Crisis*

Recently, another institutional shift has begun. Since 2000, three of eight AAA presidents have been linguistic anthropologists. More anthropology departments are looking to (or willing to) hire people who study language and culture. And in several articles, linguistic anthropologists emphasize dialogue with cultural anthropology. At the same time, these scholars implore others to recognize the complexity of language and communication. This suggests that dialogue may be one-sided. Overall, these trends reflect increasing re-inclusion of the subfield into the discipline and, for some, a desire to return to a more integrated perspective.

Still, the confluence of historical developments (outlined above) with the current labor crisis in higher education has made it difficult for junior scholars to navigate the relationship between cultural and linguistic anthropology. Given the scarcity of non-temporary jobs in all of the social sciences, many of us are anxious about positioning ourselves within the small subfield of linguistic anthropology (the Society for Linguistic Anthropology comprises 6% of the AAA). Whether due to the subfield's small size or its partial separation from anthropology as a whole over the past forty years, linguistic anthropological theory and terminology remains opaque to many other anthropologists. On the job market, concerns about how search committee members (often, cultural anthropologists) will read our work can exert an influence on how we junior scholars write and present ourselves. And managing these differences can be an extra hardship for colleagues confronting significant social marginality (especially marginality in terms of race, gender, nationality, sexuality and class).

This can lead to difficult situations. For instance, at a job interview, a colleague of mine was asked, "We already have one linguistic anthropologist. Why should we hire another?" I have heard linguistic anthropological analysis critiqued as an obsession with details that cultural anthropologists implicitly

understand. And I have seen scholars criticize the use of transcripts as sources of data for drawing conclusions about cultural practices. Unfortunately, our responses to these questions can sometimes have life-changing impacts on our careers. It is tempting in such situations to become a professional chameleon and try to blend in as a cultural anthropologist. However, in doing so we may sell short the contributions of the subdiscipline and give up much of what makes our research distinct. One might reply to questions and critiques by explaining that linguistic anthropologists study a broad range of cultural phenomena from distinct theoretical perspectives such that we are not interchangeable with one another; that a focus on recorded data is often essential for understanding the dynamics of language as social action; and that transcription is part of an epistemological standpoint in which we draw conclusions from recorded data alongside fieldwork experiences and fieldnotes.

The study of language and culture has always been interdisciplinary and much innovation has emerged amid a healthy disrespect for categories and boundaries. Cross-disciplinary borrowings and integration with cultural anthropology are to be lauded, but we should also be sure to retain the subdiscipline's unique epistemological and methodological contributions. Pointing out the historical integration of linguistic and cultural anthropology while maintaining a commitment to the intellectual traditions and specificities of our subfield is one way in which we can continue to demonstrate the value of scholarship on language and culture.

#### *Acknowledgments*

This commentary is based on two recent publications ("Linguistic Anthropology in 2012: Language Matters," *American Anthropologist*, and "Linguistic Anthropology and Ethnolinguistics," co-author E Falconi, forthcoming, *Handbook of Linguistics, 2nd ed*). Thank you to Nathaniel Dumas, Robin Conley and Elizabeth Falconi for comments on earlier drafts of this piece. Thank you to Aaron Ansell and Susanne Unger for the invitation to write this piece and for comments on earlier drafts. All opinions and any mistakes are, of course, my own.

*Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA Contributing Editors **Aaron Ansell** ([aansell@vt.edu](mailto:aansell@vt.edu)) or **Susanne Unger** ([susanne.unger@gmail.com](mailto:susanne.unger@gmail.com)).*

---

#### Share this:

Facebook 126   Twitter 24   Google   LinkedIn 3   Email

#### Like this:

Like

Be the first to like this.

This entry was posted in [August, Section News](#) and tagged [Society for Linguistic Anthropology](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). [Post a comment](#) or leave a [trackback](#): [Trackback URL](#). [Edit](#)