

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

A Few Words with SLA's Incoming President

Bonnie Urciuoli

After the November 2013 AAA meeting, Paul Kroskrity becomes the sixteenth SLA president. In April 2013, we spoke about a few issues relevant to the section and the subfield.

Bonnie Urciuoli (BU): What led you to take an active part in SLA?

Paul Kroskrity (PK): I've always thought of myself as a linguistic anthropologist and I've always been active in SLA. I served as secretary-treasurer in 1988, when that position included the newsletter column. I've served as board member, and am currently president-elect, so, when I become President at the end of the 2013 business meeting, I will have 'run the table' of positions, so to speak. The SLA is my primary professional identification and I enjoy being professionally active. I chaired UCLA's American Studies Program for 25 years. I've organized language conferences, and run an SAR advanced seminar. Administrative positions provide great opportunities to meet people and when performed effectively they enrich the professional experience of everyone involved.

BU: What do you see as some concerns in section leadership?

PK: SLA needs to maintain the kind of voice that we have had at the AAA table. SLA has been a small minority within AAA but we've benefitted because our subfield gives us a bigger place at the table. We've enjoyed a kind of over-representation, with our members being very active on committees both in SLA and in the AAA more generally. We want to continue that kind of participation.

BU: Our business meeting attendance seems huge.

PK: Yet there are fewer than a thousand subscribers to the journal, and we're altogether a tiny fraction of the AAA membership. So it's good to maintain the influence we've enjoyed.

The other issue is to keep the journal going. Although revenues have been good, there are some issues appearing on the horizon. We've been profitable for quite a while, but we need to consider upcoming costs and their impact on the work of the editor and editorial board. You never know how long the editorial and publishing arrangements currently in place will last. We're in good financial shape now, but there are projected costs to be considered in terms of new possibilities online and in terms of the way the field is breaking right now. It's hard to know the whole Association's relation to Blackwell. But a high priority for now is to keep JLA as the flagship journal of the SLA.

BU: Can you address some key intersections of section concerns and academic issues?

PK: We might encourage the formation of more interest groups, focused for example on public outreach, engaged linguistic anthropology, or methodology. As interest groups, they qualify for additional program time.

BU: Could this expand the notion of applied work?

PK: Perhaps in working with Native American groups and other groups in need of social justice, the distinction of applied and theoretical might be thrown out the window. The whole way of doing our research as responsible academics should relate to, engage, help the people we work with. There are parts of our discipline that value theory as an elite discourse and pay less attention to the responsibility side. Certainly there is room for both types of research but most communities studied by linguistic anthropologists, as in the case of those where heritage languages are endangered, clearly need our skills and may require our advocacy as a condition of approval. I'd like to see in linguistic anthropology in a parallel change to one in cultural anthropology where the popular image of an iconic anthropologist shifts away from elite theorists like Geertz and Clifford to someone like Paul Farmer. I'd also like to see more AAA events such as lunches with students and practicing linguistic anthropologists. I am concerned that younger anthropologists who do close analyses of media may be moving away from the face-to-face ethnographic heart of linguistic anthropology that makes our subfield distinctive.

BU: How might SLA public outreach especially benefit our section?

PK: I thought about this when I saw the *New York Times* treatment of John Gumperz's death. I felt their obituary trivialized aspects of his fieldwork and the whole treatment calls attention to the gap between what we do and what the outside world is likely to pick up on. It's the problem of language ideologies in mainstream American culture: since language is so transparent why should we pay detailed attention to it? So we have the problem of convincing the mass media that there is something people could learn from our work, that people are not in complete control of their language. I'd like to see more development of institutional language policy and media policy, encouraging our own people to produce successful public outreach and have some kind of influence. We might think about an award—for researchers who attract public attention to linguistic anthropology—along lines of our book award.

BU: The media either trivialize the familiar or romanticize the exotic. What can we do?

PK: Take language endangerment for example. People talk about it in terms of numbers or intellectual treasure. But in our writing we need to put faces on people experiencing this marginalization, what it means to lose heritage languages. The press misses this and reproduces stereotypes like that of "Eskimo snow" vocabulary to represent potential linguistic loss. But if we want the public to better understand, we need ethnographic approaches that speak to mainstream society. Maybe we could get 20 scholars to develop our own public instruction segments, to show how language works in ways not covered by current go-to experts like psychologists and MIT linguists. Another issue at recent AAA meetings is the limited teaching of linguistic anthropology in community colleges or even in undergraduate education. If we can't create a greater public awareness, the field loses presence not only in the public eye but also in higher education, which affects the availability of jobs for those in the subfield and the possibility of more enlightened reforms of language policy.

*Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors **Aaron Ansell** (aansell@vt.edu) or **Bonnie Urciuoli** (burciuol@hamilton.edu).*

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