

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Language and Social Justice Committee Activities, 2013-14

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The 2013-14 activities undertaken by the joint CfHR (Committee for Human Rights) and SLA Committee on Language and Social Justice – (LSJ) began at the 2013 AAA meeting and remain ongoing.

The LSJ met at AAA on November 21, 2013 to discuss current projects, upcoming issues and media-contact strategies. Current projects include work with the Census Bureau to find a replacement for the term “Limited English Proficient Household” (where no residents older than 14 self-report speaking English “well” or “very well”) that is now used instead of “Linguistically Isolated Household” but remains problematic. Upcoming issues include derogatory names and mascots for sports teams (especially “Washington Redskins”), “language gap” studies (psychological studies positing the existence of a social and cognitive development deficit among children allegedly not exposed to enough (English) words), and support for state efforts to bring back bilingual education. LSJ list members will be surveyed for further input on other issues, including LGBTQ-related slurs, discussed at the meeting. Strategies were discussed for conveying these concerns to media. Suggestions included the production and circulation of documents, position papers, and op-eds paired with outreach to local media, and the creation of an expert knowledge database. Similar concerns have been highlighted in an ongoing series (2012, 2013 and 2014) of AAA roundtables of journalists and anthropologists discussing professional divides.

Since the AAA meeting, the LSJ has focused most attention on language gap work. Background in brief: Human development specialist Todd Risley and psychologist Betty Hart, authors of the 1995 book *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, have argued that vocabulary growth in early childhood is a key factor in later success in school and the workplace, and that by age three, significant differences could be observed in the vocabularies of children of middle-class professionals versus low-income parents. Stanford psychologist Anne Fernald published a 2013 article arguing that such differences emerged by 18 months. Philanthropists Terrance and Judith Paul read the Risley and Hart book and decided to fund the design of speech recognition technology that could be used to count those words. They founded Infuture Inc. in 2004 which became the LENA foundation in 2009, with UCLA-trained linguist Jill Gilkerson as Language Research Director. LENA developed and sells devices that parents can attach to toddlers’ clothing to do the word count. Fernald’s study, the original Risley and Hart book, and the LENA device (whose inventor has financed further research publication, eg [here](#)) have all received favorable attention from media and elected officials. For example, Providence RI mayor Angel Taveras, using Bloomberg Philanthropies startup funding, initiated a “[Providence Talks](#)” project to encourage low-income parents to use—literally—more words when talking to their children.

LSJ has made several responses. Op-eds by Eric Johnson, co-signed by other LSJ members, have been sent to the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post (which have not yet published them) and circulated at an April UCLA conference on “Rethinking Linguistic Proficiency.” Susan Blum posted a critical commentary on a [Huffington Post](#) blog. Kathleen Riley was interviewed for a PBS News Hour segment on the “Providence Talks” project. Blum and Riley are co-authoring a piece to appear in AN. These responses have striven to make clear that word-count efforts are based on a poor understanding of language reduced to a list of words, and that the technological fix so appealing to public officials utterly ignores the inequalities that structure differential access to the products of education. This is not an easy message to put into sound bites.

Language Ideology, Metasemiotics and Capitalism

Communicating with media is exacerbated by the ideologies of language and meaning with which media (and the population at large) operate: reference is transparent; ‘neutral’ or ‘correct’ terminologies exist; and specialists should provide such terminology. Some of the frustrations of working with the census bureau on terminology to better characterize what are now called “Limited English Proficient Households” arise from these notions. Once material is published, it is commonly viewed as fixed knowledge. Moreover, the ‘facts’ and ‘explanations’ most frequently reported are those that most readily fit metasemiotic regimes based on problem-solving and linear, cause-and-effect fixes. Thus, what best fits that frame are fix-it products. In this way, the “language gap” has been entextualized as objective fact and a readily-solved problem.

Commodification becomes an exacerbating factor. In the issue of sports team mascots and names, commodification plays an obvious role. To take the example most central to LSJ concerns, the name “Washington Redskins” is a highly profitable brand, and any decision to change it will certainly be tied to bottom-line considerations. The role of commodification in the promotion of policies to “fix” the language gap is less obvious, but can become clear to readers who take a look

at the shop tab on the LENA Foundation website. The word-counting LENA device starts at \$400 for use-at-home models. The “call for quote” on the various pro versions suggests that this is a product line designed with income from research grants in mind. And the enthusiastic response of politicians and policy makers, bolstered by favorable coverage in the New York Times, Boston Globe, National Public Radio, and so on, suggests that those grants may well get funded. So the objective ‘facticity’ of an invented problem and its solution, manifested as a ‘scientific’ device, is reinforced by its entrenchment in research economics. In the face of that, the complex responses of actual experts on language and society cannot gain much semiotic traction.

New Core Membership, More Electronic Presence

The committee’s 2013-14 core members are Netta Avineri, Patricia Baquedano-López, Robin Conley, and Daniel Suslak, replacing H Samy Alim, Adrienne Lo, and Jonathan Rosa. Work is underway to create LSJ presence on the SLA website and on Facebook.

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

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