

LSA Issues Statement on Racial Justice

Note: In early 2024 this page was transferred “as is” from LSA’s old website to preserve the historical record of these advocacy efforts. Please be aware that the original hyperlinks and other information on the page may no longer be current.

Wednesday, June 3, 2020 - 2:28pm

The LSA [Executive Committee](#) issued the following statement earlier this week:

Participants at the 2020 Session on Black Becoming for Language and Linguistics Researchers at the LSA Annual Meeting



The Linguistic Society of America asserts its collective support for Black members of our community — students, colleagues, family, friends and neighbors — who are carrying an extraordinarily painful burden during these already distressing times. The pandemic has highlighted the structural anti-Black violence and broader racial disparities endemic to our communities. Black lives are

being lost at a disproportional rate as important life outcomes for Black citizens continue to be diminished. In recent months and days, we have seen murders of people of color by vigilante civilians and the police, and we have heard explicit devaluation of Black lives and legitimization of attacks against them from the highest levels. We have also seen, with rising horror, the active suppression of ongoing peaceful protests and threats of military deployment against dissenting citizens. The LSA stands opposed to oppression and injustice in all its forms, and to the weaponization of language and culture.

As asserted in the LSA [statement on race](#), linguists are well positioned to contribute to social justice and equality in ways that benefit the discipline, speakers, communities, and academia. The statement is well worth reading in its entirety. It came out of work by Charity Hudley, Mallinson, Bucholtz, Flores, Holliday, Chun, and Spears, ‘[Linguistics and race: An interdisciplinary approach towards an LSA statement on race](#)’ (*Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America*, [S.I.], v. 3, p. 8:1–14, Mar. 2018).

As linguists, we need to continue to ask what we can do as individuals, programs, departments, and a discipline to bring about change. There is already important work in these directions and a clear

need for more. Police brutality is addressed specifically in a number of articles. In '[Language and linguistics on trial](#)', for example, Rickford and King detail the devastating role that dialect unfamiliarity and prejudice against speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) can play in the criminal justice system and beyond (*Language* 2016, 92.4: 948-988). Their study looked at jurors' reactions to the testimony of Rachel Jeantel in the Trayvon Martin case, concluding that 'Mis-hearings and misjudgments of AAVE and other vernacular speakers have potentially devastating consequences in courtrooms, but also in other domains, like police encounters, classrooms, apartment hunting, and job interviews.' For their article '[Language from police body camera footage shows racial disparities in officer respect](#)', Voigt, Camp, Prabhakaran, Hamilton, Hetey, Griffiths, Jurgens, Eberhardt and Jurafsky analyzed more than 100 hours of body camera footage from Oakland Police and discovered that officers consistently use less respectful language with black community members than white during routine traffic stops (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, June 2017 114 (25) 6521-6526; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1702413114). Based on experimental studies of housing discrimination, John Baugh coined the phrase 'linguistic profiling'. His 2018 book *Linguistics in pursuit of justice* (Cambridge), explores how linguistics can be used to advance justice and equality in education, employment, medicine, and the law. It is now clearer than ever that such work must continue.

The LSA statement on race also makes the point that linguists must be active participants in creating an intellectually inclusive community. For linguists seeking to mentor and support students of color, listening to and respecting their experiences is crucial, as is acknowledging and addressing rather than overlooking or denying the role of the discipline of linguistics in the reproduction of racism. To include those within the discipline of linguistics and to extend these efforts outward requires that linguists actively work to promote equity and social justice in ways that benefit underrepresented scholars and communities of color.

The LSA strongly supports the peaceful demonstrations across the country and beyond and stands with our Black community in collectively seeking justice and equality for all.

Further Reading/Viewing

[Testifying while black: An experimental study of court reporter accuracy in transcription of African American English](#)

Taylor Jones, Jessica Rose Kalbfeld, Ryan Hancock, and Robin Clark. *Language*, Volume 95, Number 2, June 2019, Linguistic Society of America

[The Significance of Linguistic Profiling | John Baugh | TEDxEmory](#)

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