

Gender representation in Linguistics

Background: As a data-driven science, example sentences represent a main source of data for linguists in the fields of syntax, semantics, and sociolinguistics. [Pabst, Cepeda, Kotek, and Syrett 2019](#) present a survey of example sentences in 6 syntax textbooks published between 2005–2017. Among their findings, men are twice as likely as women to be the subject of a sentence, to be referred to by a pronoun, and to receive a proper name. Example sentences furthermore perpetuate gender stereotypes: e.g., perpetrators of violence are predominantly male and victims are predominantly female; professionals are mostly male; and women are more often referred to using kinship terms. This work built on a similar study published in [Macauley and Brice 1997](#), which examined 10 syntax textbooks published between 1969–1994 and reached almost identical conclusions. As a result, [Pabst et al.](#) conclude that gender bias remains systemic and pervasive in the field of linguistics.

The current project: The above work is limited in at least two ways. First, it concentrates on syntax, whereas example sentences are also used in other subfields. Second, it restricts its attention to textbooks, which are geared toward students. A lingering question, then, is whether/how scholars are affected by this issue. This application seeks funds to support extensions of this work into two related domains: journal article publications and course syllabi. The work will be led by Hadas Kotek — a collaborator on the work described above, and currently a lecturer at Yale’s linguistics department — who will supervise a group of five graduate students and several undergraduates.

We are interested in asking whether the gender bias observed by [Pabst et al.](#) extends to currently active linguistics scholars, and whether (and how) it has changed over time. To study this, we plan to conduct a longitudinal study of *Language*, the flagship journal of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA). We additionally plan to conduct a comparative study of other leading journals, including at least *Linguistic Inquiry* and *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*. We take 1997 to be a potential starting point for this part of the study, as the year in which the LSA first officially adopted [guidelines against gender bias](#). Finally, we plan to compare the status of constructed example sentences, which represent the majority of data in the above journals, with corpus-driven work, which relies on naturally-occurring language data. We have begun operationalizing our choices of journals and coding, but have not begun data collection yet.

We are also interested in asking how scholars choose to represent their own subfields and areas of research in self-constructed syllabi. To this end, we plan to survey two data sources to learn who is cited, and how often: The [open syllabi project](#), and the syllabi collected by the LSA [AP Committee](#) over the past year as part of an independent project run by this committee.

These large data sets will allow us to conduct fine-grained statistical analyses, as well as collect compelling individual examples, about the (under)representation of women in linguistics.

Project deliverables: We will present our results in international conferences and prepare at least one journal submission. We additionally plan to prepare a position paper in collaboration with the LSA’s [Committee on the Status of Women in Linguistics](#), of which Kotek is an active member, on best practices in course design, to be submitted for adoption by the LSA executive committee.

This is a fitting time for work of this kind, which has been embraced by the linguistics community. This is evidenced by the highly successful Special Session “[Our Linguistics Community: Addressing Bias, Power Dynamics, Harassment](#)”, co-organized by Kotek and colleagues at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the LSA. Organizers and activists in this area are in need of additional empirical evidence regarding the (under)representation of women and other minorities in linguistics, to further and support their work. This work is also clearly within scope of the WFF’s mission to “promote scholarship by women and on women and gender across all schools of the University.”