

Johnston plenary abstract
Sociolinguistics Symposium 2023: “Diversity, difference & dialects”
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Title: A matter of survival: Supporting diversity, difference & dialects in career pathways for linguists

Abstract:

The supermajority of Linguistics PhD degree holders—about 97%—do not find secure, tenure-line (TL) employment in academia. Instead, Linguistics PhDs find work in 1) contingent, precarious faculty positions or “beyond academia” in 2) business, government, nonprofit and tech organizations. Adding to the number of PhDs working beyond academia are most of the Bachelor’s and Master’s degree holders. Despite these employment outcomes—a result of an abysmally low number of TL positions as well as a growing market for linguists in applied research, conversation design, user experience research, and healthcare communications—many linguistics programs continue to train doctoral students for academic careers and provide little direct training in general career discernment and career management beyond academia. However, departmental attention to career management is an ethical imperative. It is the linguists from historically underrepresented backgrounds who are marginalized again when linguistics career pathways as well as the ‘hidden job market’ are not discussed.

Taking the theme of SoSy2023 literally, I make a case for linguistics departments and programs to take a sociolinguistic lens to post-graduation outcomes of their students in the interest of advocating for and supporting all students, including the most marginalized. I ask departments to document the diversity of their graduate’s career pathways and acknowledge and support those differences without privileging a particular “prestige” variety. In this talk, I’ll provide 1) data on the academic job market, 2) data on the beyond-academia market where linguists find a fit for their skillset, and 3) action steps that departments can take to support their students in career discernment. It’s a matter of survival for our field: If we want to continue to attract new majors and new graduate students, we need to provide career clarity. More importantly, it’s a matter of survival for our students, who want and need to find fulfilling careers that use their linguistic skill set and pay their bills.