Some thoughts about Linguistics as a field

In this paper I am going to talk about a series of things each maybe only tangentially related to one or another but all of which in some way relate the central theme: What does the field of generative syntax look like now and what shape might it take in the future? I am doing this for a variety of reasons, but the major one is because I am an invited contributor to the gathering "Generative Syntax Questions, Crossroads, and Challenges" to be held this coming June 2017 in Barcelona, organized by Dennis Ott and Ángel Gallego among others. My thoughts come from a very US-centric perspective because that's where my knowledge and experience is. Many of these thoughts are not new; so be it, they are no less relevant for that.

My thoughts here are largely motivated by an "extra-syntactic" concern, or at least by a concern that might at first blush seem to be extra-syntactic, namely money. As background and maybe excuse, I am not going to be in Barcelona for the meeting that I was invited to because I cannot afford to. In my current job, I have no funding for travel and my bosses (at some school- or college-wide level; my immediate superiors are blameless) have determined that people with my job title "visiting assistant professor" cannot apply for travel funds from the school. Additionally, the organizers of the conference were not granted funds by their relevant institutions to offer to the invited contributors. Multiple friends have independently offered to set up an internet-based fundraiser on my behalf, akin to those raising money for people in the US who cannot afford health-care, but for a number of reasons I don't feel comfortable doing that, not the least of which is that it would be humiliating. This is both the topic and the animus of these thoughts.

Academia has traditionally be the domain of the socio-economically powerful, though in the post World War II period of the United States it entered a period of democratization that somewhat mitigated this. Universities expanded and civil rights efforts and programs like the GI Bill opened the doors to a degree. It was in this well-funded expansion that generative grammar in its modern incarnation was born and it is directly because of this singular period that it is as dominant as it is today. As much as I deeply believe in the superiority of the ideas of generative grammar, I do not think that it was their superiority that was the main force behind their success. It may have been a necessary ingredient, but the current lay of the land was determined by economic forces. I hold this opinion for a few reasons. One being a sort of Feyerabendian notion that ideas do not supplant or best one another by any stable definition of superiority. Another being that in my own personal experience, my economic situation affects my linguistic work much more than my linguistic work affects my economic situation.

Now it might be a false move to apply reasoning from the individual level of my experience to higher group levels. We see this mistake whenever someone argues against nation states holding debt by noting that holding debt might not be ideal for individuals. But there's a sense in which

the work of the larger field of linguistics is nothing but the output of individuals and as such the relation is obvious. The field of generative grammar has flourished and succeeded insofar as there have been large numbers of people engaged in it. This is a notion independent of quality, the amount of quality work has grown just as the amount of bad work has. I am wowed in succession by all of great work being done and by all of the terrible work being done. It is hard to claim that this profusion of bad work is the result of the profusion of good work, but much easier to claim that they are both due to the expansion (in terms of literal individual people engaged) of the field. And as should be obvious, it is money that limits the number of people working in a field. If there is no funding for work in a certain area, there is little work done there (assuming a certain type of economy).

The United States is an immensely rich country and its wealth is distributed according to its priorities. Recently, the funds allotted to higher education by the government (state and federal) have been reduced. Schools have offset this reduction to a degree by asking more money of students, but a deficit remains and this has led to a reduction in tenured positions and the shift towards temporary jobs with lower pay and more unpaid work in general. Asking more of students individually and paying less to workers overall has a compounding, if not immediate, effect. Students will come more often from families with more money to spend on education (this is currently forestalled with untenable levels of student loan debt). These undergraduate students are the source of the instructor pool so the socio-economic status of your undergrads will affect the socio-economic level of your instructors. Also, the less instructors are supported by their institutions, the more they will require external support (like familial wealth), thus exacerbating the trend of wealthier people in academia (though this is currently forestalled not by loans, but rather the capacity of instructors from more modest backgrounds to self-abnegate, which I, as an optimist, take to be finite).

The result of course is a re-closing of the gates, the gradual restitution of academia as the domain of those with inherited power. As stated above, this is not an immediate or uniform process, but given current conditions it is effectively ineluctable. This re-cloistering is relative and it was not the case that academia in the post-war period was ever more than slightly democratized. In linguistics as well there was never a golden era of equality. The overwhelming preponderance of white people in the field is clear evidence of this, though I suspect the inequality holds of other dimensions as well. In particular, I suspect that most professional success in linguistics is enjoyed by those whose parents were professionals/went to college and those who went to private or magnet high schools. As someone without that sort of background, these distinctions are that much more salient and visceral. From personal experience, I often feel like I am trying to slip in before the gates (further) close me and my kind out.

I think there is little that generative linguists can do to stem this, but it must be reckoned with. The number of professional linguists and the class background of those involved is going to change and this in turn will affect the content of the work done. At the very least there will be less of it, but the sharpened stratification of practitioners can have other repercussions as well. Any sort of hierarchical stratification leads to incidental, value-neutral characteristics or behaviors of one group being prized over those of another. As linguists this should be apparent given what is known about language standardization and the prejudices that result. The accidental characteristics of those with more power (say their pronunciation of words) take on a prestige whereas the opposite is the case for the accidental characteristics of those without power. Moreover, there develops a set of post hoc rationalizations for the characteristics, newly imbued with prestige, of the more powerful group. I think this sort of thing is inevitable for generative grammar (and to a degree already exists), though I only have speculations as to the particular forms it will take.

The effects of travel funding are very clear. The more powerful group has travel funds and can go to conferences without paying out of their own pocket. The ability to travel for conferences is effectively a filter on the dissemination of your work and lines on your CV. Independent of whether it is sensible or not to explicitly determine merit based on conference presentations, and independent the weight that such CV lines carry, it will increasingly be the case that those lines will be the mark of certain class of linguist. Interpersonal interaction at a conference with colleagues has additional effects. Your colleagues develop a fuller mental image of you from actually interacting with you in person, not just during the conference proper, but more importantly at the social gatherings outside it. Friendships are made at conferences and a sense of belonging is nurtured. This is all the more pressing in the case of in-person job interviews at the annual LSA meeting that not everyone can afford to attend. These clearly mutually reinforce each other and are clearly beneficial. Missing out on these has a similar mutually reinforcing effect.

It may be said that interaction over the internet serve to overcome these issues, but I think that unwisely discounts actual in person interaction and is an anti-human stance. Moreover it just seems to be false. The internet doesn't necessarily serve as a leveling medium. If it did, we might see physical locations become less important with its growth. The opposite is true with San Francisco, New York, Seattle, and Boston as physical locations becoming even more disproportionately important in the internet age.

Differences in free time is another disparity that will only grow. Though even those with relative power in linguistics are increasingly asked to do more with less time, the negative effects of that are more clearly felt on those with less power. More to the particular point here, the effects of having more free time can show themselves in subtle ways that might not be recognized as

time-related. The threat is that the effects of having relatively more free time can made into virtues, independent of their real value or lack thereof. I am thinking in particular of the format or neatness of presented work.

Take typesetting. There is a certain amount of free time that is require to learn to create a document in either Latex, and a certain amount of time required to make either a Latex or Word document reach a particular standard of beauty. It is of course not necessary to use Latex or make good looking Word documents to do good linguistics, but its use is clearly a sign of having had the time to do so. Over the last two school years I have taught 16 classes (7 different courses) and though I am not entirely unsympathetic to complaints of linguists in more powerful positions, I have had very little time to devote to making my work pretty. Insofar as pretty work is the work done by those with more time, and those in power have more time, an accidental virtue will be made of pretty work. From there a post hoc rationalization may be made that ugly work impedes communication, perhaps in the same way that undergraduate students report less comprehension of a some speech when accompanied by a picture of a non-white person than they do when the same speech is accompanied by a picture of a white person (Rubin 1992). This issue extends in all manner of directions, including the prettiness or existence of your personal website, the quality of your verbal presentation, complex animations in your powerpoints, etc. These are all made less accessible to some and thereby become a virtue though they are strictly speaking independent of the quality of the work presented.

A related issue is the breadth and depth of citations in the work presented by those with less time. I think there is a distinction to be made between a linguist's quality as a *researcher* of linguistics and a linguist's quality as a *scholar* of linguistics. I do not want to discount too much the importance of scholarship in linguistics, but it seems clear to me that research is more central to the enterprise. With more time to devote to the creation of a linguistic work, more time can be allocated to the the comprehensive discussion of all manner of previous work ranging from the most obscure to the most cutting edge. It is of course important for others to be able to follow up on the cited works and assumptions in your work, but a maximalist approach is both unnecessary and the sort of thing that demands time. Additionally, those very citations often do not serve any other purpose than to show off your scholarship or rhetorically imply that you too are doing cutting edge work. As such, those with more time will be in a position to augment their work with relatively superfluous discussion and citations beyond that which is necessary. I do not intend to promote a minimalist approach to citation and discussion here. I only intend to note that a potential division between groups of linguists that is independent of the research and one that could unfairly serve as a mark of quality.

The above concern is related to the issue of paper bloat in general. Linguistics papers, at least in theoretical linguistics, have grown in length over the years. The reasons for this are surely

myriad and probably include the desire for a sort of completism of discussion with respect to past scholarship as well as a quasi-empiricist drive to corral recalcitrant data points (which by the very nature of language necessarily abound). Whatever the motivation, it should be clear that paper bloat has not correlated with any sort of ever-increasing quality or importance of the papers. Given the rate of expansion I don't think we as humans would be able to fathom a proportionate growth in importance. It would crush us, but hasn't. And there is more to be learned and appreciated in the first chapter of Chomsky's Aspects than there is in my entire oeuvre. The length of a given linguistic work is a better indicator of the amount of time devoted to it than it is the quality or importance of the work. However, if longer work ends up more and more fixed characteristic of a certain group of more powerful linguists with free time, it will all the more take on the assumption of importance or quality.

Disparities in free time can also subtly show themselves in how much one can devote to teaching each class. Needless to say, teaching fewer classes allows more time per class to devote. When teaching 3 or 4 or 5 classes in a semester, as much as you try, sacrifices have to be made in the quality of teaching. This can take many forms such as slower grading, fewer comments on graded work, slower responses to email, and a more rote presentation during the actual class sessions. This diminished quality is not immediately perceptible to the outside, but arises in the form of worse student evaluations (which can affect your being employed whatsoever) and fewer teaching awards.

There are surely other instances where characteristics that are strictly speaking independent of good linguistic work could be made into implicit virtues. And it's likely that the some what I wrote in the above paragraphs is incorrect in the details. That's not so much a concern for me. My core point is this: There seems to be an ongoing reduction in the number of good linguistics jobs and ongoing increase in bad linguistics jobs. I don't care about a precise formulation of 'good' or 'bad' here, use your brain. The bad jobs leave less time to the production of research for a certain group of people and that crunch is going to be reflected in what they produce in ways that might be independent of the quality of the research. There are general normative trends in social stratification which lead to otherwise content-neutral characteristics acquiring talismanic properties. Properties that make some work seem more worthy than others.

I think this already exists to a degree (maybe even a great degree), but it seems the conditions are ripe for it to become worse. The question I want to address next is what if anything should we as a field do about it?

There are arbitrary normative conventions that we, as linguists, know are devoid of purpose in and of themselves and that only serve to maintain and further entrench unfair systems of power. These are things like norms of pronunciation, spelling, prescriptive grammar, and even extend to

rhetorical styles and conversation norms. We know this, yet hold our students to these standards to varying degrees, not because we think they are justified, but because we don't want to disadvantage our students who live in a world where those are seen as important. In the best case, we teach them both the formalities and why the formalities are unjustified and wouldn't exist in a better world. We are responsible for our students' ability to succeed in the wider world. But linguistics as a field in itself is not beholden the wider ignorant concerns of outsiders. We have conscribed venues where the opinions of non-linguists matter much less: conferences, workshops, journals, and the like. Here we should be able to set the norms as we see fit, or in this case, ignore them.

If we want to lessen the effects of a stratified linguistic community, we should engage in a process of radical acceptance of non-standard work. This might involve making individual conscious efforts to tempers one's reaction to spelling errors, missing citations, ugly handouts, and bland powerpoint presentations. One often takes these as indications of shoddy work or shoddy research, but in a world with increasing material disparities between linguists, these are better indicators of a lack of time. If we allow these superficial differences to paint our perceptions of the work, it will only compound the disparities that already exist.

This would take some non-trivial effort, I suspect. It was difficult for me to divorce my perceptions of, say, British English pronunciation from my assessment of the speaker and the content of what they say, but it is doable with sincere effort. And I'd like to think think the same can be done in this realm, because it should be.

Though the above efforts would be moot if only linguists in certain jobs have the means to travel to conferences. If it's the case that travel funds cannot be acquired through official university means, then some other source is needed. An obvious source would be tenured faculty. I can imagine a fund set up for any given conference where the tenured faculty donate into a pool for those without travel funds. I can imagine a variety of qualms with this sort of idea, but I would urge the reader to ask themself whether those qualms are greater concern than a conference system that locks out the more vulnerable members of the field.

An area where there has been non-zero progress is the area of Open Access journals. Strides have been made in this area towards a more equitable future and away from the long-entrenched norms of the field. I would like to think that the same communal motivation that fuels those efforts could be extended to other areas.

These and other efforts could serve to mitigate the impending changes in the field. I would like the reader to think hard about what the response should be and what the real repercussions of inaction would be. It might be the case that many linguists find the material disparities between

different linguists to be a natural, inevitable, or good thing. That there is some market-style wisdom expressing itself in the placement of one linguist in a secure tenure-track position, the placement of another linguist in an arduous contingent teaching position, and the slow expulsion of yet another from the field. If that is the case, I would hope that the restriction of tenure track jobs and the growth of bad contingent jobs is at least seen as a cruel distortion of that erstwhile equitable system and work to fix it.

I am immensely grateful for the worldview and knowledge that linguistics has offered me and I see linguistics as a crucial tool for the underprivileged. So often political and social mendacity is built upon equivocal use of language and the tendentious ascription of negative characteristics to people based on their native language use. Knowing about the true nature of language undermines those hateful methods in a uniquely sharp way. Linguistics has allowed someone like me from a modest background to see the ruse that the more powerful pull to keep my kind in my place for what it is. This is a precious and powerful tool and we should make its use accessible to those who need it most. One way to do this is prevent the field from further closing up on itself.

Rubin, Donald L. "Nonlanguage factors affecting undergraduates' judgments of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants." *Research in Higher education* 33.4 (1992): 511-531.