

10 July 2020

Dear Executive Committee of the Linguistic Society of America;

I was disappointed by your message to the membership delivered on 8 July 2020 entitled, “The LSA is Committed to Intellectual Freedom and Professional Responsibility”. I found the message to be dismissive of the concerns of a large number of members of the society as it never acknowledge the petition that prompted it. It was also vague in a way that those not already engaged with the ongoing debate were not given an invitation to entry. Finally, it was presented with likely unintentional tone of finality rather than the ongoing reevaluation that this issue demands. I ask that you seriously reconsider this message and outline definitive steps that include all members on how you will address the issues.

The LSA message can only be read as a response to petition delivered to the LSA with just over 600 signatures regarding Dr. Steven Pinker’s status as an LSA media representative and Fellow of the Society. Though, at no point is the petition acknowledged in the LSA’s message, nor has the petition’s receipt been directly acknowledged to my knowledge. As Dr. Borer notes, “the [LSA’s] letter makes oblique references to the petition, although not to its content directly, and one must judge its attitude by omission, rather than by inclusion”¹. Members of the society who were not engaged in early discussions of the petition were largely confused by the LSA’s message.

I want to emphasize that I share your desire to protect intellectual and academic freedom; however, it is important that we recognize that there are boundaries to intellectual and academic freedom. Intellectual freedom is not a shield for intolerance, hate, or unprofessional conduct. I believe it is possible to support both robust academic freedom while simultaneously working to root out hateful views.

There will be spaces where reasonable people will disagree; however, as philosopher, Karl Popper, in his 1945 work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* noted as the “Paradox of Tolerance” that unrestricted tolerance of the intolerant will lead to end of tolerance. It is the very foundations of tolerant, open society that the intolerant seek to destroy.

Further, the actions suggested by the petition in no way prevented the full exercise of academic freedom or speech. Rather, the question bears on the rights of association and representation. I was disheartened to see the leadership fail to appreciate and address this question.

The question before me when I signed the original letter was what kind of LSA I want in the future. Again, I share your belief that it should be open with free exchange of ideas—even ideas that sometimes make us uncomfortable. But, what remains true and what prevents that goal from becoming a reality is that too many are presently excluded from the conversation. While the LSA has taken steps to improve, recent events show there is a deep gulf between where we are and where we need to be.

If you do not closely follow social media Dr. Steven Pinker declared victory upon receipt of your letter delivered 8 July 2020 via his Twitter account. He further discounted the petition noting, “Don’t blame established linguists: I recognize only one name among the signatories”². I want to highlight two major

¹ [Power Differentials and the SP Petition](#)

² He later updated this comment in a 9 July interview (*Unheard*, “[Steven Pinker: They are trying to cancel me.](#)”) to: “there were several hundred names on it. Very few of them were well-known linguists, names I recognized”.

issues with this comment. First, it suggests that fame and reputation are what makes one's opinions worth listening to—this is certainly not the case in the field of linguistics that I know, nor is it in keeping with the values of LSA. Second, if he truly does not recognize more than a single name it demonstrates how far removed he is from the current state of our field. The signatories indeed included many students, post-docs, and junior faculty, but it also included at least seven Fellows of the LSA, multiple linguists with considerable media profiles, and others with considerable reputation within the field. It is most likely that the comment was made simply to be dismissive. Regardless, it is further demonstration of the harm he is causing the field writ large as a delegated representative.

I am further dismayed that the response by the EC, beyond the email, is to construct new barriers for new potential media representatives. While the development of a process is a good idea in principle, it does not correct the immediate issues and if not carefully constructed such a process will only serve to widen the gulf that already exists in the LSA.

I believe we also need to separate the issues of Fellowship and status as media representative. Many have argued that a Fellow once granted this honor may not have it removed. I have serious doubts that this is true. Taking a thought experiment, imagine a potential Fellow who is found guilty of a serious breach of academic misconduct, say falsifying data, or a Fellow found guilty of a serious felony. I have no doubts the LSA would move to remove their title. Perhaps this belief is mistaken. But if there is a line (or not), the LSA must now take steps to outline what they are and what such a process is. If being a Fellow is a truly a lifetime award with no possibility of revocation, then the LSA must clearly state that as well.

I want to be clear that I am not accusing Dr. Pinker of a felony or of data manipulation, though, recent discussions by both Drs. Esipova³ and Adger⁴ make compelling cases for harmful misrepresentation of academic work. Perhaps, it will be determined that these misrepresentations do not warrant the revocation of Fellowship. Perhaps, the LSA will determine that no behavior warrants such a revocation. What is clear is that this conversation needs to happen and be as transparent as possible.

Moving forward, I ask that the LSA take more care in its messages to members—particularly upon receipt of a petition from several hundreds of its members. Status, reputation, publication count, employment, fame, etc. should not be considerations when considering such petitions. We are a Society of our members. We need to fully embody our values. To this end, I ask that you quickly outline the means by which the task forces outlined in your message will be formed. That the process for selection of these task forces be open and transparent and involve a general call for volunteers.

I am a Life Member of the LSA because I am committed to the field of Linguistics and to our community of scholars. But the lack of leadership shown on this issue makes me question both the long-term health of the LSA and whether I was right in making this commitment. I hope I am yet proven correct in this commitment.

Sincerely,
Jeffrey Punske

Associate Professor & Life Member

³ [On Steven Pinker's tweet about Lawrence Bobo's interview](#) & [On Steven Pinker and Heather Mac Donald](#)

⁴ [That LSA Letter](#)