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ABSTRACT

During the great increase in college enrollments of the 1950's and 1960's, many linguists saw opportunities for expanding the prominence and practice of linguistics by starting a linguistics program where there had been none before. New linguistics programs can no longer be justified in view of the current job market. The number of linguists being graduated each year far exceeds the number of available positions. Consequently, many linguists already trained will not work as linguists, through no choice of their own, in the coming decades. Students in our colleges and universities would be better off majoring in a more traditional, well-charted discipline, with the option of selecting as many linguistics electives, available in several different Departments, as their time and interests permit. This is not to say that existing linguistics departments must be broken up, but that the present balance between institutions with active linguistics departments and those without should be maintained. (PMP)

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Getting a Linguistics Program Started?

In the great increase in college enrollments throughout the 1950's and 1960's, as colleges grew into universities and universities into multiversities, many linguists saw opportunities for expanding the prominence and practice of linguistics by "getting a linguistics program started" where there had been none before. At the very least this meant offering an undergraduate minor in linguistics, or a departmental specialization; the linguist not teaching in a linguistics department, however, has typically longed to teach to "real" linguistics majors as well--and then to MA candidates, and PhD's. In short, he has schemed for a program which would eventually grow into a full-fledged linguistics department.

In many places these goals have been achieved. However, the time has come to re-examine such objectives--and not merely because of the dreary current economic situation (as compared with that of the golden days just past). True it is that "getting a linguistics program started" in any major way these days is almost certain to be a windmill-tilting enterprise. But even if funds were available to open departments of linguistics in every college in the country, one should think twice before doing so, anywhere. In terms of our practical commitments to our students and their careers, we already have a sufficiency of linguistics programs--too many, perhaps. Furthermore, in terms of what ought to be the nature of a university education, "getting a linguistics program started"--a degree-granting program, at any rate--seems to me a very ill-advised move indeed.

The practical objections are certainly the easiest to reveal, however; one need go no further than the Linguistic Society of America's recent manpower survey to see that what the world needs over the next twenty years is not more linguists, but fewer: "even if the number of PhD's levelled out at the 1971 level of 176, we would still need 150 new positions every year in order to provide employment for new linguistics PhD's entering the labor market" (Carroll and Levy 1973:34). Present projections, however, are for a doubling of the number by 1980, if current growth rates are maintained. Few jobs are forthcoming outside of academic institutions: the manpower survey (Carroll 1973:15) reports only ten total openings for all the years 1970-73. And within the academy, only a few "new faculty members will be needed in the 1970's and none in the 1980's" (Carroll and Levy 1973:33). The message, in short, is clear enough: existing PhD programs must drastically reduce the number of advanced degrees now being granted; the least prestigious programs should seriously consider going out of business; schools without linguistics programs have no business beginning them.

Of course, "getting a linguistics program started" is more likely to entail master's and bachelor's degrees than PhD's. However, the situation here is, if anything, worse: new MA's in linguistics, it is anticipated, in general "will face a more difficult time in the job market than the PhD's" (Carroll 1973:16)--especially in light of the increased competition from those with doctorates. MA's from new, unknown programs would surely find the job market hopeless. BA's and BS's were not even included in the LSA survey; bachelor's degrees, to the extent that they are given in linguistics, are widely viewed as little more than preliminary to graduate study. But if the number of advanced degrees is to be curtailed in the future--and again, surely it must--so, too, must the opportunity for graduate study be limited. What, then, are BA's in linguistics to do--those people who are the result of

"getting a linguistics program started"? Of course one might argue that we all need to begin linguistics programs in order to employ the hoards already being trained at Harvard and MIT, Berkeley and the Univeristy of Texas, Penn, Chicago, Indiana, Georgetown, Hawaii and Illinois, as well as the University of Iowa, The University of North Carolina, the University of Georgia, Syracuse, Northwestern, and so on. But again, the realities impinge: this is just an academic version of the chain-letter--what economists and public prosecutors call the "pyramid scheme." By the end of the century every man, woman, and child in the United States would have to be pursuing a degree in linguistics to prevent the starvation of those already trained.

The sad truth appears to be that at least some--and perhaps many--linguists already trained as linguists will not work as linguists, through no choice of their own, during the coming decades. To increase our number thus strikes me as cruel and irresponsible--however desirable we might personally find it, as individuals, to be a part of a linguistics department, with all the prestige that such a position ostensibly supplies, and with all the professional stimulation that brushing shoulders daily with advanced graduate students and other linguists is supposed to provide. Aside, however, from these practical questions, there are also philosophical objections to "getting a linguistics program started." At the undergraduate level, at any rate (which is of course the level at which most of us could start programs most easily, making use of existing faculty through an interdepartmental committee) justification for degrees in linguistics seems questionable indeed. One may love linguistics and still feel that the field is far too specialized, too new, and too uncertain for a major at the undergraduate level. At a time when requirements for majors in established departments are shrinking, it seems feasible for most undergraduates to study almost as much linguistics as might be good for them and still major in an established department.

At my own school, for instance, an undergraduate major consists generally of only eight courses. There are at least twenty linguistics courses available throughout the various departments, many of which undergraduates can take without an undue amount of overlap and repetition, and without the strict orientation to only one or two schools of thought that departmental structures sometimes impose. The diverse linguistic philosophies of instructors who are scattered throughout a university can be a virtue indeed. Moreover, while the achievements of linguistics are real and important, it is nevertheless such an infant science, as our introductory textbooks (the transformationalist, anyway) keep telling us: "this is all probably wrong." Do we really need or want a program of eight required undergraduate courses in that sort of thing? Aren't students better off, both practically and educationally, with a structured program in more traditional and well-charted disciplines, selecting as many linguistics electives as their time and interests permit? I think so.

This is certainly not to say that existing linguistics departments should be broken up (though Columbia University saw fit to do so a few years ago). Nor is this to deny the achievement of many American linguistics departments in providing an exciting intellectual climate in which important and stimulating work has been done--one need search no further than the Papers from the past ten meetings of the Chicago Linguistic Society to establish this. But there are, it would seem, advantages to going no further than the present balance between institutions with active linguistics departments and those without. We can survive as the "token" linguist in the English Department (or French, or Psychology, or Anthropology) precisely because the position is not token; rather, we are needed to bring the word to the unknowing--who would remain untutored without us. Such diversity has been good for linguistics in the past. Such diversity is vital for the future.

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