Who speaks for us? Lessons from the Pinker letter*

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Abstract

In the short time since the Open Letter to the LSA regarding Steven Pinker was published in early July 2020, it has evoked many different reactions across the field of linguistics. This commentary examines how the letter has been received in the field and outside of it, in news outlets as well as on social media. The findings are troubling. Our comprehensive review of reactions to the letter shows that not only are Pinker and his supporters spreading demonstrably false claims about the letter, its signatories, and the LSA itself, but that these claims are being repeated uncritically by a great many media outlets. We discuss possible reasons for this state of affairs and provide suggestions for how the field should deal with media attention in the future.

1 Introduction

The field of linguistics has recently been shaken by an open letter submitted to the Linguistic Society of America on behalf of over 600 signatories (Open Letter to the LSA 2020). This letter—commonly referred to as The Open Letter or The Original Letter, henceforth TOL—argues that public statements made by LSA Fellow and Media Expert Steven Pinker have been inconsistent with values that the LSA publicly espouses, and as such, asks LSA leadership to revoke his status as LSA Fellow and remove him from the list of media experts. TOL has launched vigorous debates in the few weeks since it was published, the content of which has ranged from the status of TOL's claims to issues of hierarchy and power in the field.

Much of the conversation around TOL has taken place on social media, in networks which not all linguists have access to, and in a wide range of news outlets. Our goals in this paper are therefore: (a) to shift this conversation from social media platforms and mainstream media to the general linguistics community, (b) to make an empirical point, arguing against a number of claims made by Pinker in his media appearances regarding TOL and the field of linguistics, and (c) to explain why it is important to consider how TOL and Pinker's response to it have been

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portrayed in the media, both traditional and social, in order to make our field more inclusive (regardless of one's geographical location or attitude towards TOL).

The arguments of TOL are themselves immaterial to this paper; however, a coherent debate requires participants to agree on the facts. Under the magnifying glass of worldwide media, accuracy and intellectual integrity are matters of import for all linguists, beyond the narrow confines of the LSA and beyond the academic sphere of the United States. As we will show, attempts to correct Pinker's demonstrable mischaracterizations and falsehoods about TOL, its signatories, or the field of linguistics in general have been consistently rebuffed and sometimes met with open apathy (or even antipathy) on the part of journalists and editors. We find it thus necessary to document our empirical arguments against several of Pinker's claims made after the release of TOL for the benefit of the general linguistics community and beyond.

We take our cue from work outlining ways in which self-examination and self-correction can be carried out in linguistics (e.g. Charity Hudley et al. 2020). In particular, we will draw on the following passage from the LSA's recent Statement on Race (emphasis ours):

> *Linguists must reject the marginalization of the intellectual interests of those who are traditionally underrepresented in the discipline and the profession. Linguists must continue to scrutinize and dismantle privilege within linguistics,* particularly resisting within-discipline exclusionary practices and rhetoric that position some scholars, sub-disciplines, institutions, research areas and so forth as worthier than others *and that thereby make racially restorative work more challenging.*
> (Linguistic Society of America 2019)

We maintain that practices such as the ones outlined above remain our charge as linguists even when they take place outside of the academic discipline proper, for example in the media. In this paper, we confine our discussion of Pinker's speech solely to comments made in relation to TOL. We begin by refuting the veracity of certain claims he has made about TOL and then evaluate his media tactics in light of the field's stated values. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents some basic background on TOL and subsequent events. In Section 3 we evaluate three claims disseminated widely in the media, showing that they are false. Section 4 attempts to draw lessons from these findings, and Section 5 concludes.

2 The TOL timeline

In this section, we provide a summary of the origins of TOL, its circulation, and reactions to it both within and beyond the field of linguistics. We additionally describe the extensive media coverage received by TOL. Such an occurrence is fairly rare: major news outlets do not usually

cover disputes between scholars in such depth. Our description relies on these published sources as well as on personal communication with some of the anonymous TOL writers.

Our goal here is not to rehash the arguments in TOL nor to examine their validity. For published posts considering the arguments themselves, we point the reader to Adger 2020, Esipova 2020, Green 2020b, Rett 2020a, and Snider 2020. See also Adams 2020, Coyne 2020a, and Partee 2020 for critical discussion. Instead, we focus here on the facts surrounding the timeline of the writing and circulation of the letter and the initial response to it, to preface our discussion of the narrative surrounding it in Sections 3 and 4. This timeline might be particularly useful for readers who are less familiar with the discourse around TOL, or who are not active on the relevant social media networks (mainly Facebook and Twitter).

2.1 Initial circulation

TOL was first written on July 1, 2020 (Open Letter to the LSA 2020). This letter, written by a group of authors who have remained anonymous to date,[1] was inspired by LSA's Statement on Race (Linguistic Society of America 2019) and the LSA's Statement on Racial Justice, officially announced by the LSA on June 3, 2020 (LSA Executive Committee 2020a). The letter calls for "the removal of Dr. Steven Pinker from both our list of distinguished academic fellows and our list of media experts" because of behavior that "is systematically at odds with the LSA's recently issued statement on racial justice".

According to the TOL writers (p.c.), a draft was then sent to a small group of linguists selected by the letter writers for feedback. Once finalized, TOL was circulated via email to colleagues, again selected by the writers. After 50 signatures had been collected, TOL was publicly opened for signatures on the afternoon of July 3, 2020, at which point multiple social media posts about TOL started to appear.[2]

Within 72 hours, over 500 signatures had been collected, and a vigorous debate began on social media. The letter was subsequently submitted to the LSA Executive Committee on July 6. The letter was only open to signatures over a single weekend that happened to coincide with a US holiday: Friday July 3rd to Monday July 6th. We detail next the sudden and substantial public

[1] Since the letter's publication, no one has come forward to publicly claim a role in its writing. The letter writers have likewise taken multiple measures to protect the anonymity of early contributors, including: the creation of a special email address for all communication about the letter; a promise to keep the names of early signatories private until at least 50 names had been collected; and the fact that the signatories are alphabetized rather than added by date.

[2] For consistency, all times reported in this paper refer to Pacific Daylight Saving Time. This is not a claim about the location of the majority of the writers or readers of the relevant writings.

attention that TOL received, which led the TOL writers (p.c.) to such a quick transition from creation to submission.

2.2 Early publicity triggers attacks and leads to early submission

As noted above, TOL initially appeared on social media posts on the afternoon of July 3, 2020. Within an hour of the earliest recoverable tweets from linguists sharing the letter, Claire Lehmann, Founding Editor of the online magazine *Quillette*,[3] retweeted a tweet by research fellow and *Quillette* contributing author, Richard Hanania, which contained images and a link to TOL, adding the following sentence as context for her more than 207,000 followers: "Sixty-six linguists have signed this pathetic letter [link to Hanania 2020]. The accusations are as strong as a piece of warm lettuce" (Lehmann 2020). In the first two hours following the release of TOL on social media, *Quillette* editors Toby Young and Jonathan Kay, each of whom has several thousands of followers, joined Hanania in drawing negative attention to the letter. Circulation and publicity were further expedited when Steven Pinker then tweeted TOL to his over 660,000 Twitter followers on the afternoon of July 5, 2020 in a series of tweets (Pinker 2020a, 2020b):

> *Some wondered* [if] *this open letter to the Linguistics* [sic] *Soc of America* [link provided] *demanding they rescind my Fellow status is a satire of woke outrage culture, w its hallucinated "dog whistles," fury over tweets of NYT & WaPo opeds, and obvious forged signatures... But it's real, suggesting that Cancel Culture has entered its decadent phase. Don't blame the LSA (at least not yet): they haven't canceled me, & probably won't. Don't blame established linguists: I recognize only one name among the signatories.*

Pinker tweeted or retweeted content about TOL 12 more times that day, and added 10 more tweets on July 6, 2020. At this point, TOL had decidedly left the linguistics realm, for which it was originally intended, and was being read and broadly discussed by many others outside the field.

By July 6, 2020, four linguists had been quoted or retweeted by Pinker.[4] These tweets include the following defense from McWhorter, chair of the LSA Public Relations Committee, on July 5, 2020 (McWhorter 2020a):

> *Every fucking line of this is must-reading on the attempt to defenestrate @sapinker. Decide for yourself about the erudite demons at the gates.* [link to Coyne 2020a]

[3] Lester (2018) identifies *Quillette* as one of the primary vehicles for what is known as the "Intellectual Dark Web", what she calls "a loose cadre of academics, journalists and tech entrepreneurs who view themselves as standing up to the knee-jerk left-leaning politics of academia and the media". See also Beauchamp 2019 and Minkowitz 2019, among others. We find this network to be firmly in Pinker's camp but will not pursue the point here.

[4] Iris Berent, Edward Gibson, John McWhorter and Barbara H. Partee.

The attention the letter was drawing outside linguistic circles had one immediate consequence: attacks on signatories made it difficult to debate TOL any further. These took various forms, including public threats and attacks on Facebook and (mainly) Twitter, as well as emails sent directly to signatories and to the anonymous email address created by TOL writers;[5] some of these attacks have been archived in our Online Appendix.

Perhaps most importantly, less than an hour after Lehmann's tweet (and three hours after the initial appearance of TOL on Twitter), fake signatures started being added to the letter (TOL writers, p.c.). The addition of fake signatures is significant, as it was used by Pinker as a means of discrediting TOL (Pinker 2020a; Sayers 2020). These signatures included the names of several working linguists added without their consent. Others ran the gamut from (British comedian) "Richard Herring" to "Adolf Hitler". In fact, the majority of the fake names and associated comments made it clear that they were submitted by people who wished to disrupt the letter.[6] Once the extent of the signature interference came to the attention of the letter writers, the submission form for new signatures was taken down, and the writers undertook the task of manually verifying every signature that had already been added. However, this process soon turned out to be unsustainable.

On the evening of July 6, 2020—24 hours after Pinker publicized TOL to his followers—the letter was submitted to the LSA, earlier than the writers had intended (p.c.).

2.3 The LSA's response

The letter was sent to the LSA via email on Monday, July 6. The LSA first acknowledged receipt of the email from the letter writers four days later on Friday, July 10, 2020. The brief response, sent to the anonymous email address created by TOL writers, as now quoted in an addendum to TOL, states that two task forces will be established, "to examine appropriate methods of addressing the requests made in [the] letter. This will include the consideration of policies and procedures for designating Media Experts and reconsidering a member's status as a Fellow." The

[5] Since email addresses were not publicly included with the letter, this means that individuals took it upon themselves to search names of TOL signatories, find their email addresses, and then compose an email. This caused concern, especially among younger signers, because of the danger of potential *doxxing*, an action defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "to publicly identify or publish private information about (someone) especially as a form of punishment or revenge". See also some testimonials in the Online Appendix.

[6] In personal communication with TOL writers, we were told that in total, 48 signatures were identified as fake. These include names such as *Dolores Greatamsky, Thisi Scrazzi, Steven Renpik* (an anagram of Pinker)*, Viva Pinker, Dr Selma Bouvier, Mike Hawk, Joseph Stalin*, and *Mao Zedong*, among the less vile names, along with titles such as *Prof. Of Witch Hunting 101*, *Dean of Haram Linguistics, Outrage Culture and Public Lynchings*, and *witch hunter*, and affiliations such as *Righteous U*, *Church of Scientology*, and *An actual university*. In total, of 9 comments submitted through the form, all were clearly in support of Pinker. We do not include here the names of real individuals which appear to have been added without their knowledge or consent.

response additionally asks for TOL writers' patience while the task forces undertake their work (Open Letter to the LSA 2020).

On July 8, two days before acknowledging the receipt of TOL, the LSA Executive Committee issued a statement to its membership with the title, "LSA reaffirms commitment to intellectual freedom and professional responsibility" (LSA Executive Committee 2020b). This statement does not mention TOL, but was nonetheless understood by many to be a response to it, saying in part that "it is not the mission of the Society to control the opinions of its members, nor their expression," and that the LSA opposes "statements and actions of racism, misogyny, and other forms of hate" and "would of course condemn the misuse of linguistic science and other scholarly ideas, tools, and resources to justify hateful statements and actions." The statement closes by announcing the establishment of two task forces, one "to establish clear policies and procedures for ensuring transparent, equitable, and inclusive nominations, awards, appointments, and elections" and the other "to establish clear policies and procedures for transparent, equitable, and inclusive public communications via social media and other means." The statement promises that the work of both task forces will be reported in the 2021 LSA Annual Meeting. The statement contains no further details about the membership of these task forces or discussion within the linguistics community.

As we will discuss at length below, Pinker took this message to signal the support of the LSA Executive Committee. In a series of tweets from July 8 (Pinker 2020d, 2020e, 2020f), he writes:

> *Don't blame the Linguistics* [sic] *Society of America! Or the majority of its members. They received the petition, considered it over the weekend, and just repudiated it, affirming that the Society is "committed to intellectual freedom and professional responsibility. It is not the mission of the Society to control the opinions of its members, nor their expression. Inclusion and civility are crucial to productive scholarly work and inclusion means hearing (not necessarily accepting) all points of view, even those that may be objectionable to some."* [link to LSA Executive Committee 2020b]

Many TOL signatories and others who had since become sympathetic to TOL expressed their discontent with the LSA's response. In addition to individual posts on social media, we are aware of 15 letters delivered to the Executive Committee in the aftermath of its July 8 message, from signatories and non-signatories of TOL alike, in which individuals expressed their dissatisfaction with the response; one such letter has been made public (Punske 2020). Some of the common criticisms voiced against this response included its failure to mention TOL (which was potentially confusing to the LSA members who had not been aware of TOL), its vagueness and apparent focus on "intellectual freedom" rather than on the issues raised by TOL, and the

lack of transparency and inclusion in establishing the task forces (see, for example, Borer 2020a for a critical review of the LSA's response along these lines).

On July 15, 2020, several Twitter and Facebook posts noted that the LSA appeared to have reorganized its Media Experts page. In particular, the category of "general", which had previously appeared at the top of the page and contained the names of Steven Pinker and one other linguist (Donna Jo Napoli), had been renamed to "varia/general" and moved to the very end of the page.[7] On July 17, 2020, the page was taken down completely; as of the writing of this paper, the Media Experts page states that it is currently being re-evaluated by the LSA.

Finally, on July 17, 2020, the LSA Executive Committee issued a second statement to its membership (LSA Executive Committee 2020c). This response does mention TOL and identifies the email address used by its authors, but does not provide a link to the letter itself. The message then seeks to correct "certain misunderstandings and misinformation", most importantly that:

> *"the recent message from the Executive Committee to the membership, despite alternative interpretations placed on it by some, was not intended to be a rejection of the open letter, but rather an affirmation of our collective values and principles."*

The message further reports on progress in the formation of the two task forces introduced in the LSA's previous message, and notes that the Media Experts page had been taken off of the LSA website, pending rethinking of the concept and makeup of the page. The message ends by addressing a broader issue that had become apparent in the meantime:

> *"The EC is especially concerned about bullying and issues of differential power in the discipline at a time when some members of the Society, particularly junior members, are feeling vulnerable. To foster a healthy discipline, it is crucial that all members be aware of the potential for harm and that we work together to prevent it."*

On August 19, 2020, the LSA Executive Committee officially announced the appointment of two task forces, along with their full membership and charge (LSA Executive Committee 2020d): A task force on media resources has been asked "to rethink and rebuild a structure for an outward-facing resource for the media/journalists to have their questions about language answered by knowledgeable LSA members." A second task force on procedures for evaluating professional conduct has been asked "to establish clear policies and procedures for grievances and allegations of professional misconduct that is in violation or goes against the LSA Ethics

[7] Further, both before and after this change, Pinker appeared first on the list, despite the fact that Napoli would be alphabetized before him. This means that Pinker was the very first name to appear on the entire Media Experts LSA page prior to TOL.

Statement and the LSA Civility Policy [links to the Ethics Statement and Civility Policy]". The findings of the task forces are to be discussed at the Annual Business Meeting in January 2021. Prior to submission of the recommendations of the task forces, the EC additionally requested both task forces to establish a process for soliciting feedback and comments from LSA members.

2.4 Coverage in the media

Once word of TOL spread outside of the field of linguistics, many op-eds and editorials appeared in the national and international media. These include articles and interviews with Pinker in *The New York Times* (Powell 2020a)*, The Atlantic* (Friedersdorf 2020a)*, Mother Jones* (King 2020)*, The Telegraph* (Stanley 2020)*, The Times* (Whitworth 2020)*, BBC Radio 4* (Montague 2020), and *Die Welt am Sonntag* (Delius 2020); examination of the LSA Letter Timeline (2020) reveals that TOL was mentioned or discussed in at least 60 news outlets, 20 of which are based outside of the USA.

These articles are almost entirely one-sided, implying or explicitly stating that TOL is about no more than a few misinterpreted tweets. Instead of engaging with the arguments in TOL, the articles present the idea that TOL is an attack on freedom of speech in which Pinker is being "canceled" (see Section 3.3).[8] Few linguists were interviewed and directly quoted in these articles, with the exception of John McWhorter (Friedersdorf 2020a, Powell 2020a) and Charleen Adams (Córdova 2020, Friedersdorf 2020a), both of whom express views in support of Pinker. On the other hand, at least three linguists who were interviewed for these same pieces and expressed views in support of TOL are not mentioned at all in the published pieces (Gillon and Figueroa 2020, Hammerly 2020, Rett 2020b).

Once the articles appeared on Twitter, several linguists who were familiar with the situation responded with factual corrections about the requests made by the authors of TOL, the evidence they use to support their requests, and the academic status of TOL signatories. Linguists seeking to correct the record engaged in a direct conversation with the authors of these articles, raising concerns about imbalances in the reporting. These corrections, described in detail in Section 3, were largely ignored or dismissed.[9] TOL signatories and others who support their views have

[8] The appearance of TOL coincided with other events that might have lent the issue of "cancel culture" notoriety. This includes the fact that President Donald Trump mentioned "cancel culture" in his July 4th speech, and the publication of the Harper's magazine article—co-signed by Steven Pinker—titled "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" on July 7th, 2020.

[9] When several comments appeared on an article in *The Atlantic* by Conor Friedersdorf (2020a), he became defensive and combative, for example answering Caitlin Green's correction (2020a) with the retort, "I hope none of your colleagues ever dig through your Twitter archive and try to get you professionally censures [sic] based on uncharitable interpretations of the worst 6 things they find" (Friedersdorf 2020b) and "I find it bizarre that scholars are parsing one another's tweets to this degree and this tendentiously" (Friedersdorf 2020c). Similarly, Michael Powell, whose *New York Times* profile (Powell 2020a) of Pinker drew criticism from linguists, engaged in a lengthy

been unable to publish any op-eds in the same national media outlets that have advertised Pinker's side of the matter. These include at least three linguists (Daniel Duncan, Caitlin Green, and Jessica Rett, p.c.), who have approached the following venues: *Slate*, *The Guardian*, *Vox*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Science*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Perhaps the sole exception is Joseph McVeigh, who was interviewed by the radio program *W Radio Colombia* (McVeigh 2020).

As a result of the media's one-sided coverage of this issue, Pinker's narrative has also been faithfully reproduced on Wikipedia. Due to Wikipedia's policies excluding original research and self-published content, only those articles which have been published in traditional media—effectively those relaying Pinker's narrative, as described above—are legitimate sources for citation. As a result, a list of TOL detractors is included in the English language Wikipedia entry for Steven Pinker (Wikipedia 2020a) because they were listed in a *Mother Jones* synopsis (King 2020). But because no media source has published a list of TOL supporters, and because TOL itself (including even the names of its signatories) is self-published, no countervailing list can be included (Wikipedia 2020b). The same is true for the numerous dissenting pieces, including Borer 2020b, which have not been covered by traditional media and are thus excluded from citation.

2.5 Interim summary

In this section, we have provided a comprehensive timeline of reaction to TOL within linguistics but primarily outside of the field. In doing so, we demonstrate that media coverage has been one-sided, aligning itself fairly consistently with Pinker's view; why this might be the case will be discussed in Section 4, in which we discuss Pinker's rhetorical tactics and his (or his public relation firm's) media savvy. This coverage has furthermore resulted in a one-sided synopsis of the incident on Wikipedia, as its public editability and detailed bureaucracy, while designed to ensure neutrality, ended up merely reflecting the biased media coverage. We have also noted some of the forms of intimidation and abuse which signatories and supporters of TOL have been subjected to. In the next section, we examine the information relayed in the media, and show that it has consistently repeated three false claims made by Pinker: that the letter was rejected by the LSA, that no prominent linguists signed the letter, and that he is being "cancelled".

Twitter back-and-forth with Todd Snider, who had critiqued his article (Snider 2020), finally terminating the conversation with a single word, "Cool" (Powell 2020b).

3 The false narrative

3.1 Claim #1: The letter was rejected

The first factual misrepresentation concerns the LSA's response to TOL. On July 8, 2020, Pinker publicly claimed that the LSA "received the petition, considered it over the weekend, and just repudiated it" (Pinker 2020d), citing the LSA's first email to its membership (LSA Executive Committee 2020b). As mentioned in Section 2.3, this email did not mention TOL at all, nor did it announce any official decisions beyond the creation of two new task forces. Pinker repeated this claim in a tweet on July 10, 2020, stating that "It was a petition TO the LSA, which the Society did not accept" (Pinker 2020i), again in another tweet on July 13, 2020, stating that "the Linguistics [sic] Society of America rebuffed the petition" (Pinker 2020j), and again in an interview with the German *Die Welt am Sonntag* (Delius 2020), stating that "The Linguistic Society of America rejected the petition" (translation ours).

This claim was repeated in a number of news outlets which had spoken with Pinker. For example, on July 15, 2020, *The New York Times* printed, "The linguists demanded that the society revoke Professor Pinker's status as a 'distinguished fellow' and strike his name from its list of media experts. The society's executive committee declined to do so last week" (Powell 2020a). As argued by Snider (2020), this reporter's description isn't merely a description of inaction, but is rather a description of an act of rejection—such an interpretation is not supported by the LSA's first email, and is explicitly refuted by the LSA's second email, which reads: "[T]he recent message from the Executive Committee to the membership, despite alternative interpretations placed on it by some, was not intended to be a rejection of the open letter." (LSA Executive Committee 2020c).

On July 19, 2020, *The Telegraph* quoted Pinker, implicating LSA President Marianne Mithun as well:

> *The Society of Linguists [sic] might even offer a model of how an institution should act when a valued and trusted member comes under attack: "A number of linguists threatened to resign from the society if they accepted the letter" and the president of the society "didn't express any sympathy for the letter and the society itself repudiated it."*
> (Stanley 2020)

The strong claims about TOL being rejected by the LSA are false. And while it is true that LSA President Mithun did not express any sympathy for the letter, she did not express any opposition

either, given that no public statement was issued one way or another. Nevertheless, Pinker's narrative that the LSA and its president rejected the letter is the one dominating reports in the media.

A variation on this theme was then provided in a story on *Campus Reform* on August 1, 2020, which had apparently spoken to Pinker:

> *The LSA did not acquiesce to the linguists' demands, Pinker told Campus Reform in an email, and he has been "the beneficiary of 15 defenses in various publications and blogs."* (Copeland 2020)

Again, it is technically true that the LSA did not acquiesce, but only because it has not yet, as of the writing of this commentary, passed any judgment. We return to this rhetorical decision in Section 4.

Lastly, in the same piece:

> *Pinker told* Campus Reform *that he has not seen anyone defending the letter.* (Copeland 2020)

While we cannot account for what Pinker had or had not read, we can confidently assert that (a) public defenses of TOL were widespread (see the list in Borer 2020b); and (b) someone who identified themselves as Pinker responded at length on July 16 (Pinker 2020o) to a comment by Charles Reiss (2020), posted July 13 on the topic of Borer's (2020a) public defense of TOL. So, unless Pinker's email to *Campus Reform* was sent more than two weeks before their story was published, or it was not Pinker responding to Reiss, but someone impersonating him, this claim is plainly false.

In sum, all variants of Claim #1 are false.

3.2 Claim #2: The signatories are unimportant

The second false claim that Pinker has repeatedly made regards the status of the letter's signatories. On July 5, 2020, in Pinker's first public comment about TOL, he implored: "Don't blame established linguists: I recognize only one name among the signatories" (Pinker 2020b). He followed his suggestion that few, if any, of the signatories were themselves "established linguists" by "Don't blame the Linguistics [sic] Society of America! Or the majority of its members" (Pinker 2020d). He repeated these assertions in an interview: "There were several hundred names on [TOL]. Very few of them were well-known linguists" (Sayers 2020), and

again: "the other signatories, most of them were graduate students and lecturers. In fact, they could be anyone who identified as a linguist. So this is by no means an indication of the sentiment among professional linguists." (Montague 2020).

As we will show, it is inaccurate to claim that "very few" of the signatories were "established" or "professional", no matter how one cashes out those categories. The intention behind these claims will be analyzed in Section 4, where we argue that they are meant to belittle Pinker's opponents and mark them as a target for attacks.

3.2.1 Signatories by academic rank

Since the letter is public, we conducted an informal analysis of the academic ranks of its signatories. In total, 623 signatures were analyzed. We provide a few notes on our methodology, but would like to first emphasize that this discussion is not about *individuals* but about the overall trend.

A group of linguists coded each name on the list by academic rank, according to the following breakdown: Student / Non-tenure-track (post-doc, visiting faculty, etc.) / Pre-tenure (tenure-track) / Tenured or retired / Industry and alt-academia. Many of the signatories provided their job titles, but others were added according to internet searches and personal communication. Titles outside of the North American system were translated based on job permanence; for example, a UK Lecturer was coded as Pre-tenure if they were still in their probation period and Tenured if they had passed it. Where no easy decision could be immediately made, the datapoint was simply discarded. This methodology resulted in N = 606 classified signatories.

All aggregate results are available online at https://tinyurl.com/yxd22mlk.[10] As seen in Table 1, more than 30% of the letter's signatories are tenured or tenure-track, and of these, over 100 signatories are tenured or retired professors.

	Student	Non-tenure-track (post-doc/VAP/etc.)	Pre-tenure	Tenured/retired	Industry/alt-ac	Totals
TOL N	257	85	70	119	75	606
TOL %	42.4%	14.0%	11.6%	19.6%	12.4%	100%

Table 1: Signatories of TOL by career stage

[10] This spreadsheet includes similarly calculated totals for the signatories to the response letter by Pauline Jacobson, David Pesetsky and Barbara H. Partee posted on Facebook on July 7, 2020 (LSA Letter Timeline 2020), a list which is not publicly available.

The claim that "very few" of the signatories were "established" or "professional" is therefore false.[11] We return in Section 4 to discussion of why such a claim would even be relevant. But it has been made, it has been widely circulated, and it is incorrect.

We next compared the makeup of signatories to the general makeup of the LSA membership, in order to examine whether TOL was driven by a skewed sample whose career stage does not represent the LSA as a whole. The LSA's Annual Report (Linguistic Society of America 2020) reported a total of 3,297 members, classified as either Student, Faculty, Industry and alt-ac, or Other. Collapsing our own coding of Non-tenure-track, Pre-tenure, and Tenured/retired into one category, "All Faculty", we arrive at the comparison in Table 2. This table shows that the ratios are overall fairly similar.

	Student	All faculty	Industry/alt-ac	Other	Totals
TOL N	257	274	75	N/A	606
TOL %	42.4%	45.2%	12.4%	0.0%	100%
LSA 2019 N	1044	1276	211	766	3297
LSA 2019 %	31.7%	38.7%	6.4%	23.2%	100%

Table 2: Signatories of TOL by career stage - comparison with LSA membership

We focus on the rough distribution of groups as opposed to individuals, because signatories would not have expected to be analyzed in such depth when they signed, and, as we return to in Section 4.1, fear of retribution was also a factor in deciding whether to sign the letter. For these reasons, we are not making our detailed coding public, and we have not conducted any statistical analysis on the findings. That said, these findings have been replicated in a similar analysis conducted by Dow (2020) and clearly refute Pinker's assertions.

3.2.2 Signatories by seniority

Another method of analyzing Pinker's claim is to instead focus on individuals. If his claim should be evaluated on the basis of individual names, then one could check how recognizable the senior signatories were, as name recognition is likely to increase with seniority. Once again setting aside the question of why this should matter, a review of the list reveals that seven other LSA Fellows were themselves signatories: Karlos Arregi, Mary Beckman, Hagit Borer, Claire Bowern, Andrew Garrett, Heidi Harley and Salikoko S. Mufwene.

[11] We consider our colleagues working in industry or in alt-academic roles to be "professional" linguists, contrary to what one might understand from Pinker's statements. Nevertheless, even if they were to be excluded, Table 1 shows that the claim that "very few" of the signatories were "established" or "professional" is plainly false.

In our assessment, the list of signatories also includes many other names of prominent and established linguists which should be familiar to professionally active linguists regardless of subfield. In fact, the list includes 19 scholars who have pages on English Wikipedia at the time of writing.[12]

In sum, Pinker's claims about the signatories of TOL are incorrect under two possible interpretations of 'established': rank and recognizability.

3.3 Claim #3: The letter is a "cancellation" attempt

The final claim consists of two parts: that TOL constitutes an attempt to "cancel" Pinker; and that attempts to "cancel" a prominent member of a field, regardless of whether they succeed, will intimidate less senior members of that field, causing them to fear retribution or termination for their own views. The concept of "cancel culture" is ill-defined, however, meaning that our evaluation here is necessarily critical in nature. We do not engage with the scholarly literature on this recent phenomenon as it falls outside the scope of the current paper.

In his public response to TOL, Pinker evokes a concept commonly referred to as "cancel culture" (e.g. Romano 2019; Ng 2020). Pinker and others who have applied the term to TOL (see bulleted list below) seem to use it to describe the act of publicly criticizing high-profile figures for counteracting social justice movements. In media studies, "cancelling" is generally defined as a much larger action, a "withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable" (Ng 2020, p. 623). By identifying the letter, which asks an organization to revoke two honors, with "cancel culture," Pinker obfuscates the meaning of the term, inflating the potential impact of TOL in the eyes of his followers and increasing the sense of urgency in his appeal to discredit its signatories.

In order to arrive at some usage-based definition of what Pinker considers to be "cancel culture," we consider the news articles and tweets he has posted:

- "Some wondered [if] this open letter... is a satire of woke outrage culture… But it's real, suggesting that Cancel Culture has entered its decadent phase. Don't blame the LSA (at least not yet): they haven't canceled me, & probably won't" (Pinker 2020a, 2020b)
- Steven Pinker: They're Trying to Cancel Me (Sayers 2020); tweeted by Pinker (2020g)
- Steven Pinker: I Had to Speak Out: Cancel Culture is Orwellian (Whitworth 2020); tweeted by Pinker (2020h)
- Steven Pinker beats a cancel culture attack (Bailey 2020); tweeted by Pinker (2020k)

[12] Adger, Beckman, Bender, Borer, Bowern, Clopper, Coon, Cowper, Gal, Garrett, Harley, Kiesling, Mufwene, Munson, Piggott, Reiss, Smith, Travis and Vihman.

- How a Famous Harvard Professor Became a Target Over His Tweets (Powell 2020a); tweeted by Pinker (2020m)
- "This one, by the son of a target of McCarthyism, draws out the parallels" (Pinker 2020n): "A Letter Accusing Steven Pinker Applies Familiar Tactics" (Brown 2020)
- The Forehead-Slappingly Stupid Attempt to Cancel Steven Pinker (VerBruggen 2020); tweeted by Pinker (2020q)
- Steven Pinker - The man who refused to be cancelled (Stanley 2020); tweeted by Pinker (2020r)
- "I've received a dozen published defenses and 200 private letters of support, from all ages, races, & genders; left & right; academic allies & adversaries; friends & strangers. Thanks to all.

  Not a random sample, of course, but it makes me wonder whether identitarian cancel culture depends on a Spiral of Silence: a majority intimidated into wondering 'Am I the only sane one left?'" (Pinker 2020s, 2020t)

When describing his attempted "cancellation", these tweets and articles recruit the language of whistleblowers, discursively aligning his situation with the sorts of injustices about which people "had to speak out" at great personal risk (e.g. Whitworth 2020). Pinker extends the language of whistleblowers, suggesting that the real danger is not that he might suffer a loss, but that junior scholars will see what is happening to him and experience a "chilling effect" on their free speech. This behavior also applies to those who have publicly supported Pinker in the media including John McWhorter, who wrote in *Quillette* on July 29 that TOL "was a demand for punishment that would also serve as an instructive example to others" (McWhorter 2020b). Pinker has retweeted several articles in various media outlets that refer to this perceived danger to young scholars, for example a headline on *Spiked* (Cammack 2020) reading "Steven Pinker won't be canceled—but you could be," the subtitle of which claims that the goal of TOL is "to dissuade the next generation of academics from dissent." Pinker tweeted this on July 14 (Pinker 2020l). On July 20, he posted an article by Conor Friedersdorf in *The Atlantic* (Friedersdorf 2020a), writing, "Conor Friedersdorf @conor64 gets it right: 'The motivations behind the letter..matter less than what the attack reveals about the academy...It signals to less powerful scholars that certain opinions, publicly stated, could result in professional sanction.'" (Pinker 2020u). Without disclosing his position as Advisory Board member for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (Ford Hall Forum 2010), Pinker retweeted their piece (Pinker 2020v), titled "Linguists' campaign against Pinker flops, but still troubles" (Bonilla 2020), which warned of the dangers of failing to shut down attempted cancellations in the future: "If they don't, they risk creating a vacuum where half-baked campaigns against free expression can come in and do the talking for them."

In our assessment, the discussions of "cancel culture" linked by Pinker contradict themselves in the same tradition as fear mongering about "Schrödinger's immigrant," a pattern of anti-immigration pundits constructing immigrants both as lazy, uneducated, unskilled individuals and as a real threat to the job security of U.S. citizens (Sindic et al. 2018). Pinker has constructed a Schrödinger's Linguist, who is at once both insignificant and terrifying. Despite the discursive construction of victimhood in the cries for help implicated in statements such as "They're trying to cancel me" (Sayers 2020), it is also true that "I recognize only one name among the signatories" (Pinker 2020b). Schrödinger's linguist is "forehead-slappingly stupid" and "transparently idiotic" (VerBruggen 2020), having committed an "incompetent or halfhearted hit job," (Sayers 2020) but is concerning enough to cause Pinker's supporters to wonder, it "can't possibly succeed. Can it?" (VerBruggen 2020), and to declare that "the woke war against liberalism is far from over" (Bailey 2020).

In fact, metaphors of violence are omnipresent among the discourse surrounding TOL, playing into the authoritarian undertones such a discourse is meant to invoke. The letter was "a shot across the bow" (Sayers 2020), it is part of the "war against liberalism," (Bailey 2020), and it is an "attack" (e.g. Whitworth 2020; Powell 2020a) seeking to "get Pinker defrocked, smacked in the face" (Loury and McWhorter 2020). The signatories are "erudite demons at the gates," intending to "defenestrate" Pinker (McWhorter 2020a). Such hyperbolic language is bolstered as well by literary and historical allusions to McCarthyism (Brown 2020), Stalinism (Coyne 2020a) and Orwellian authoritarianism (Whitworth 2020). Where McCarthy, Stalin and Big Brother represent oppression by authoritarian government, Pinker has positioned the signatories of TOL in that role, reversing the expected categories of oppressor and oppressed. Rather than a governing body victimizing members of its populace for not conforming sufficiently to its edicts, the authoritarians in these comparisons appear to be the populace itself. A similar point was made in Isackson (2020), one of the very few pieces by a non-linguist criticizing the "cancel culture" framing of TOL (emphasis ours):

> *By "Orwellian language," [Pinker] presumably refers to what the novelist George Orwell termed "newspeak" in his novel, "1984." (...) It is easy and natural for a communist dictatorship to peremptorily create and impose its newspeak. In a capitalistic democracy, the powers that be must invent and manage more sophisticated methods for modeling language and thought. Both are effective in their way, as they serve to consolidate the power of those who own and control the platforms.* Pinker's platform at Harvard and in the literary world far surpasses LSA's.

While it is clear that the actions of a group with no platform at all, such as the authors of TOL, cannot be made equivalent to the behavior of dictators, it is also relevant to consider the history of comparisons like this in public media. There is a larger, longstanding trend of decrying

progressive movements as authoritarian mob rule (e.g. Coulter 2011). By harnessing metaphors of authoritarianism, siege, and battle, those in Pinker's corner have effectively weaponized decades of anti-political correctness rhetoric (e.g. Wilson 1995) against the signatories. Such catastrophizing intertextuality evinces a sense of urgency and danger, which when coupled with his discursive construction of victimhood encourages fans of Pinker to rush to his defense. Yet however understood, Pinker's claims of cancellation do not hold water.

4 Discussion

In the previous section we documented three ways in which Pinker has been shaping the public discourse around TOL and himself, facilitated by the media. Our findings show that none of these are accurate: the LSA did not reject TOL; the letter was in fact signed by many established and professional linguists; and Pinker himself is not being "cancelled," despite language he has chosen to describe the events. In this section we proceed from our empirical findings to provide a brief evaluation of the ways in which these false claims are being promulgated, and discuss why the field should take note. We focus on three rhetorical tactics and one general pattern.

4.1 Attack your opponent (not their arguments)

The first tactic could be seen at work in Section 3.2. Pinker's claim—according to which the TOL signatories are neither established, nor well-known, nor are they professional linguists—serves to minimize their standing and thereby (via an *argumentum ad hominem* and *appeal to authority*) invalidate their arguments. As Duncan (2020) argues, the consistency with which this claim is made shows it to be a rhetorical strategy. More troubling still is the way these public attacks further marked signatories as "fair game" for aggression on behalf of Pinker's supporters. We address these issues in turn.

4.1.1 Belittle your opponent

Pinker has falsely claimed that the signatories are not established linguists. The logical fallacy of an *argumentum ad hominem* aside, what would it mean if this claim were factually true? How does the status of the letter's signatories bear on the validity of the arguments put forth in the letter? Junior scholars are the future of any field, so surely they should have a say in its direction. Furthermore, discounting the validity of arguments on the basis of seniority amounts to gatekeeping, silencing voices which are already at a disadvantage (as noted in Section 2.4, the only op-eds published in media outlets have been sympathetic to Pinker). The message from such a prominent figure that the opinions of less powerful scholars are not important discourages them from publicly voicing opinions; ironically this is a far more effective form of "cancelling" than any "cancelling" Pinker has faced (cf. Section 3.3). As Arregi et al (2020) put it, "from

where we sit, the people who are truly on the receiving end of public harassment, abuse, and professional censure are those standing up for an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere of discourse in our profession, the (less senior) signatories to the letter."

Similar points were made by Ramchand (2020), who explained that the signatories' group included "a large number of young and passionate linguists whose work and integrity [established linguists] respect", who "were trying to have a say", "to have an institution that represents them". And certainly, as Borer (2020a) put it, "our junior scholars [...] deserve support. Much more than that, they deserve respect". Even if every single signatory of the letter were an unestablished, not well-known linguist, it would still stand to reason that their argument should be evaluated on its own merits, not on the merits of their CVs, and that their voices should still be listened to.

4.1.2 Insult your opponent

Moving beyond the question of seniority, Pinker and his supporters made simple, direct *ad hominem* attacks on TOL signatories in the form of insults. We focus here only on statements made by Pinker and McWhorter as they are senior figures in our field, and by Jerry Coyne, an evolutionary psychologist who published his extensive correspondence with Pinker (Coyne 2020a); attacks by other supporters are collected in the Online Appendix.

In a July 25 interview, Pinker stated that the signatories' criticisms were "out to lunch" and "delusional", and suggested that their research was "similar to excited Christians who see images of Jesus in tree stumps and wall mold" (Park and Bagaria, 2020). In a July 6 tweet, McWhorter called signatories "demons at the gates" (2020a), and later in a YouTube video (Loury and McWhorter 2020) derided them as "this kind of latte-sipping person", evoking the stereotype of the out-of-touch coastal elite. On July 20, Pinker tweeted, "it makes me wonder whether identitarian cancel culture depends on a Spiral of Silence: a majority intimidated into wondering 'Am I the only sane one left?'" (Pinker 2020t). If those who do not agree with the "cancel culture" of TOL are the "sane ones", it follows that those who do agree—in particular, the signatories themselves—are not sane. In a July 5 blog post, Coyne described signatories as "misguided zealots" (Coyne 2020a); in a follow-up post in response to Powell (2020a), he called them "yellow-bellied cowards" (Coyne 2020b).

We draw attention to these statements not only to demonstrate a pattern of insults and personal attacks, but to raise the concern that Pinker and McWhorter—who occupy places of heightened privilege within both the academic and the public spheres—felt it appropriate to do so, thus modeling this behavior as acceptable for their followers. Given that Pinker believed the TOL signatories to be largely students and other vulnerable academics, this suggests he felt it

acceptable to insult junior scholars. In turn, signatories received a flood of threats of physical violence and other attacks on social media, including the following (see the Online Appendix):

(1) Sample of attacks from linguists:
   a. "shameful affair […] This letter serves no purpose other than to present me with a list of people (some of whom I still like) who [no] longer merit my respect."
   b. "A sad testament to the scholarship and future of this discipline."

(2) Sample of attacks from the general public:
   a. "list of intellectual Nazis"
   b. "The people who typed this text and who are doing this are disgusting cultists. […] Are you as fucking useless at linguistics as you are at basic facts? No wonder you're jealous imbeciles in that case."
   c. "We need to get your bitch asses on front street so we can deal proper with your racists lies. […] we going to publicly unhorse you in the most vile and humiliating way. Step up bitch cuz it's motherfucking gangsta time ~ we coming for you!!! Where you at bitches cuz we taking more than your job and reputation, we taking you down to China town [sic] for a last supper."

To date, Pinker has not publicly indicated disapproval of the attacks on social media, many of which his Twitter account was tagged in. He also signalled support for McWhorter's and Coyne's characterizations of the signatories, tweeting links to Coyne's posts and McWhorter's "demons" tweet and YouTube video (Pinker 2020c, 2020p, 2020w).

In our view, if any "cancellation" is happening here at all it is of junior scholars who support TOL (see also the discussion in Arregi et al 2020). This pattern of attacks signals that public support for TOL, and other such forms of activism, makes already-vulnerable members of the academic community susceptible to direct insults and worse. Indeed, once these social media attacks began, several signatories contacted the letter authors and asked to have their names removed out of such concern. Others chose not to sign it at all, correctly anticipating that signatories would be targeted on social media and fearing it would endanger their careers.[13]

In sum, we would like to reiterate that scholars with privilege and public influence should be more thoughtful of the repercussions of throwing around insults like these. Linguists should take note of this tactic: the LSA Statement on Race explicitly calls to dismantle structures of privilege in linguistics (Linguistic Society of America 2019). And looking beyond this specific case, as the

[13] We know of at least one person who was explicitly advised not to sign TOL because doing so might harm their career prospects.

field continues to make its findings public, it is possible that this form of (non-)argumentation would be used against more linguists, regardless of perceived seniority.

4.2 Obfuscation

The second tactic employs rhetorical moves which aim to instill a false belief in the minds of readers by insinuation, without stating explicit falsehoods. As discussed in Section 3.1, several articles included language suggesting that the LSA had a negative attitude toward TOL. For example, in an interview with *The Telegraph*, we find the following passage: "Pinker says … *the president of the society 'didn't express any sympathy for the letter* and *the society itself repudiated it."*" (Stanley 2020, emphasis ours). Likewise, in a *New York Times* article we read that "The linguists demanded that the society revoke Professor Pinker's status as a 'distinguished fellow' and strike his name from its list of media experts. *The society's executive committee declined to do so* last week" (Powell 2020a, emphasis ours).

The highlighted passages suggest that a relevant question under discussion in the articles is *what is the LSA's reaction to TOL?* The assertion "didn't express any sympathy for the letter" suggests a clear inference, namely that the president of the LSA entertained TOL and expressed a negative view toward it. We can reach this inference by calculating a relevance implicature (Grice 1975, Levinson 2000): if we are told about the LSA president's views, there must be some relevant event where those views were discussed and/or conveyed to Pinker in some way. Moreover, the use of negation can potentially give rise to a negative strengthening effect (Horn 1989: 333-4): readers can pragmatically infer that the president of the LSA not only did not express sympathy for the letter, but condemned it. As with other conversational implicatures, however, these inferences are cancellable: it is possible that the LSA's president did not express any sympathy for TOL because she expressed no opinions about it whatsoever. This fact is the driving force behind this tactical move: although the inferences we describe here are natural ones to draw in the present context, they are never asserted. Therefore, any claim of falsehood directed at Pinker is deniable.

The issue becomes even clearer when considering the statements concerning "repudiation" and "declining" to follow the letter's suggestions. Again, the absence of an act of accepting the letter's requests can be described in the negative in a way that implies that such an act was considered and dismissed, but it could also simply follow from the fact that no act of any kind was undertaken, either in the positive or the negative. Here the status of the inferences suggested in Stanley 2020 and Powell 2002a is even clearer: The LSA's own message of July 17 asserts that "[T]he recent message from the Executive Committee to the membership, despite alternative interpretations placed on it by some, was not intended to be a rejection of the open letter" (LSA Executive Committee 2020c).

Similarly, when Pinker states that "By and large the signatories of *this kind of letter* are not members of disadvantaged minority groups. They are highly educated white people" (Montague 2020; emphasis ours), he is not saying anything specific about the signatories of TOL itself (nor could he accurately estimate minority status from a list of names most of which he, by his own admission, does not recognize). Yet this rhetorical move allows him to shift to the kind of *ad hominem* attacks of Section 4.1. And when Pinker says that the LSA itself is not to "blame" for TOL (Pinker 2020b, 2020d), he signals that TOL is in and of itself a transgression worthy of blame.

For the field, then, this tactic shows how pseudo-objectivity can promulgate false narratives. Partial truths, which are not outright falsehoods, might remain in the public discourse far more than is warranted, especially when journalists do not feel compelled to challenge them. It is important to recognize this when thinking about how to promote linguistics to the general public through media engagement more generally.

4.3 Drown the discourse with variants on a theme

In his third tactic, Pinker produces many overlapping statements which, as a whole, create a general *feeling* of persecution. For this tactic to work, it is important to make statements early, make them loudly, and make them often. The more variants on the basic theme are out there, the easier it is for them to crowd out other voices (see again Duncan 2020, and cf. Mercieca 2020).

The clearest example of this tactic was seen in Section 3.1: Pinker claimed that the LSA rejected TOL (Pinker 2020d), then asserted that the LSA declined to act, and additionally insinuated that the LSA's president repudiated TOL (Powell 2020a). Even if any of these statements is false (or all are), the overall effect is real: something is bound to stick. As another case in point, statements by Pinker and his supporters often mentioned only one of the two requests in the letter, namely revoking his status as Fellow. The request to remove him from the list of Media Experts—which was de-facto accomplished at least in the interim, see section 2.3—then became part of a vague collection of claims according to which Pinker was being removed or otherwise maligned.

Another example of this tactic was seen in Pinker's use of a "chilling effect" of "cancellation" (Section 3.3). Shifting the focus from himself to the vague and unnamed "next generation of academics" utilizes a slippery slope argument without demonstrating that the public criticism of an extremely well-known figure will lead to the silencing of less powerful scholars. By invoking the language of whistleblowers to describe himself, displacing the danger from himself onto

junior scholars, and making frequent references to free speech, Pinker paints a picture of TOL as the act of an oppressive, authoritarian group interested in stripping scholars of their rights.

The tactic also works because it can sidestep contradictions. In Sections 3.2 and 4.1 we documented how Pinker simultaneously recognized "only one" or "a few" of the signatories but was also able to pass judgments on who these people are and are not. The net result for his readership is not that Pinker is being dishonest, or that he is no longer engaging with the field, but that his opponents are simply not important enough to warrant listening to.

One possible lesson for linguistics in the public sphere is to be assertive about how language and linguistics are portrayed: we should make our claims clearly and strongly, and if they are misrepresented, we must insist that the record be set straight.

4.4 The media is not a natural playing field for academics

Our last point of discussion in this section returns to the media patterns of Section 2 in an attempt to understand why media outlets have been presenting a decidedly one-sided framing of the narrative. We recap the facts, suggest explanations for this picture, and draw some possible lessons. Unlike academic debate, which in the ideal strives for a vigorous back-and-forth of ideas, media coverage is based on different premises which linguists should be aware of.

To reiterate the relevant points from Section 2, many news outlets (including influential ones such as *The New York Times*, *BBC*, *The Telegraph,* and *Die Welt*) presented mainly or solely Pinker's own account, including the false claims debunked earlier. *The New York Times* and *La Tercera* refused to issue corrections despite our requests, doubling down on their editorial stance, while *Die Welt* has not responded. Carrie Gillon spoke with Powell for his *New York Times* piece (Powell 2020a), providing comments supportive of TOL and aiming to correct his factual errors (Gillon and Figueroa 2020), but none of that conversation was included in the article (although Powell did quote Adger 2020, as well as Jason Merchant as quoted in Partee 2020—without citing Partee's post itself). Adding insult to injury, Powell (2020a) proceeded to write in that piece that "[m]any of the linguists proved shy about talking". All attempts to publish op-eds supportive of TOL, or simply correct the record, were turned down (Section 2.4 and Borer 2020b).

What might explain this pattern? We speculate on a number of reasons here, leaving a more thorough analysis for those with expertise in media relations. First, Pinker is represented by a large public relations firm, the Lavin Agency; we (and the vast majority of academics) are not. Second, Pinker and his supporters have attempted to control the conversation from very early on,

as documented in Section 2.2; the benefits of this approach were discussed in Section 4.3. And third, the anti-TOL narrative might fit the political agenda of at least some media outlets.

One could imagine a synthesis of these factors. As a rule, the press has a vested interest in protecting its particular variant of free speech, but it is likewise reliant on catchy headlines and black-and-white narratives in order to generate interest and funds. A PR firm can tap into this tension, recognizing that propping up a "cancel culture" bogeyman benefits all parties: journalists can feel they are defending the ideal of free speech that is so critical for a functioning media landscape, their editors gain a controversial topic which will generate clicks and therefore revenue, and the PR firm gains reputational value for its client. In contrast, a story which argues that an affair is not about free speech but is instead about giving voices to the powerless is unattractive; this was the kind of story that some linguists have attempted to publish, but to no avail. See Borer 2020b for similar conclusions.

Where does this leave us as a field which both wants public exposure (for science education) and is not immediately equipped to face it (as in the current case)? We can offer a few initial suggestions to conclude this discussion:

- It is important to recognize that the playing field is not level. The experience documented here includes unsuccessful op-ed pitches, unproductive exchanges with journalists, blatantly one-sided reporting and an unbalanced summary on Wikipedia.
- Once a story has been published, media outlets have no reason to publish an update unless something new and newsworthy happens. This means it is important that linguists make their voices heard early and clearly, especially on controversial matters.
- A reporter can always choose not to quote someone, whereas a misquote is something that would need to be corrected. Therefore, we would again recommend that linguists make their voices heard so that these cannot be ignored.
- Returning to our opening framing, the field should think about how to handle attention from the outside. Larger organizations, such as the LSA, might want to engage a professional PR consultant; it is unclear to us what role the LSA's own Public Relations Committee has played in this affair (aside from the incendiary tweets and interviews by its Chair, as mentioned in Section 4.1). Smaller organizations might want to establish some recommendations for linguists approached by the media, for example "ask to send in written responses" or "discuss general patterns rather than individuals".

5 Conclusion

Like many other fields, linguistics is trying to improve itself by paying closer attention to issues of representation and diversity (Pabst et al. 2018, Muller et al. 2019, Namboodiripad et al. 2019,

Kotek et al. 2020). Individual linguists differ on their values, priorities, and strategies, of course, and most of the debate is field- and even department-internal. As such, many linguists were taken by surprise when one instantiation of the larger conversation about inclusion in our field catapulted beyond the confines of our familiar linguistic venues and community-internal discussion.

In this paper, we have critically examined the public response to the recent Open Letter to the Linguistic Society of America regarding Steven Pinker. Without engaging with the specific claims of TOL, we have provided a comprehensive review of how this letter was received, both within the context of the LSA and in the public sphere. Our findings set the record straight on a number of points. First, the field now has a written history of the affair which is accessible to all, not only to those able to piece together the different tweets, statements, and news articles. Second, we have documented three frequent claims made by Pinker, demonstrating that they are false. Third, we sketched an explanation for why these specific false claims have gained such traction and been so oft repeated in the media. Throughout, we have explained that rejecting these claims and understanding the mechanisms behind them is important if we are to follow the example of the LSA's Statement on Race; furthermore, it should be self-evident that constructive debate can only proceed if based on actual facts.

Our choice to focus on the circumstances surrounding TOL and the reaction to it, rather than the content of the letter itself, is admittedly narrow. Our commentary must not eclipse or detract attention from the types of issues discussed in TOL, e.g. racism and sexism, where the stakes are much higher. In fact, one of our hopes in publishing this paper is that the public discourse can return to a frank consideration of the aims of TOL with sincerity and civility. The rhetorical damage surrounding TOL can be undone, but only once the circumstances of its publication, the immediate aftermath, and the media's role therein have been objectively recounted.

While this test case regards the Linguistic Society of America and a prominent professor at an American institution, it is not purely a matter for American linguists; how our field is represented in the media, and how it treats its senior and junior colleagues, are issues that transcend geographic boundaries. We continue to believe that everyone in our community should be seen as acting in good faith, and that everyone makes mistakes. It is important to give individuals room to understand their mistakes, admit them and learn from them; that is what a community is for. We would be the first to offer our support if Pinker and his supporters took a step back from their harmful behavior to act on uniting the field in respectful dialog. Yet in the few cases where linguists purposefully decide not to act in good faith—doubling down on demonstrably false claims, or calling junior colleagues names—other action may be needed. Above all, we believe that this discussion brings to the fore the question of who should see to it that our field and our

colleagues are represented fairly, inwards as well as outwards: the LSA as an organization, its PR committee, senior linguists, junior linguists, or all of us as a community.

Appendix

The Online Appendix can be found at: https://who-speaks-appendix.carrd.co/

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