To: Members of Undergraduate Program Advisory Committee and symposium participants  
From: John Kingston  
Date: 21 August 2002  
Re: Symposium Proposal  

Following this message are the texts of the preliminary symposium proposal made to the Executive Committee in April, the EC’s response and recommendations, and the recommendations the UPAC made to the EC, also in April.

We – the committee and symposium participants – to put together the final version of the symposium proposal to submit by the 3 September deadline. I’m very sorry for the short notice to you all at a busy time, but as we need only flesh out the descriptions of what each presentation will consist of, this shouldn’t be too difficult. The one thing that we need to do beyond this is: pick discussants, get their commitments, and describe what specific expertise and insight they’d bring to the discussion. We can of course fall back on the depth in the UPAC itself for most or all of the discussants, but if anyone can recommend someone especially strong who’s not a member of the UPAC that would be great.

Three comments about the EC’s evaluation. First, we did send in a very sketchy proposal in April, because I mistakenly thought that all they wanted then was notice that we intended to submit a more substantial proposal in September and a brief description of what the symposium would be about. We can easily fix the sketchiness. Second, they clearly want us to relate what we’re going to do to what’s been done at earlier symposia. I’ll go back over those symposia and pull out highlights that can be related to ours. Finally, our own discussion last January picked up on the diversity of undergraduate programs and their places in their institutions, so we can also easily address the EC’s last criticism.

Practically, what I need you all to do is: (1) if you’re a presenter, send me a paragraph or three describing what you’ll present and (2) send me names of and contact information for people, who could serve as discussants, including your own if you want to. If you all could send copies of everything to everyone on the list of addresses to this message that will make discussion easier. Finally, we need to get this all wrapped no later than 29 August, so there’ll be time to get it in the mail to meet the deadline. Thanks very much.
At its meeting in January, the Undergraduate Program Advisory Committee discussed at length the many innovations its members’ departments had made to develop linguistics majors and to encourage undergraduate students to enroll in them. The committee also discussed applying for a grant from the NSF, Pew, or some other similar foundation to study these innovations and to experiment with them. We therefore propose a symposium at the Annual Meeting in Atlanta where we would do two things.

The first is to ask a number of people who’ve done particularly innovative things to attract undergraduates to linguistics to describe what they done and to explain how they’ve overcome the challenges to doing so. We already have commitments from at least Mark Liberman of the University of Pennsylvania, William Frawley of the University of Delaware, and Donna Jo Napoli of Swarthmore College to present their innovations in this section of the symposium (people from very different kinds of institutions). Liberman will also compare psychology’s enormous success at attracting undergraduates to linguistics’ comparative failure, and show how its success arises from portraying itself as an bona fide alternative to a natural sciences major, especially one with a premedical focus.

The second part of the symposium will be a panel discussion, with generous opportunities for audience participation, of a pilot project to study innovations in undergraduate linguistics education. The panelists will lay out schematically what one might learn from such a project and thereby elicit from the audience questions and suggestions that would flesh out what the project should focus on. The Undergraduate Program Advisory Committee would then use the fruits of that discussion to put together a grant proposal to the NSF or some similar source for funding for the pilot project. The expectation is that the proposal would be prepared by the Undergraduate Program Advisory Committee but would be submitted by the Society, which would also decide where the pilot project would be carried out. (The prospect of such a proposal was mentioned in the recommendations to the Executive Committee sent earlier.) The idea is to try out various innovations at institutions of different kinds to see what it takes to attract undergraduates to linguistics and to convince administrations and others that it’s good to do so.
Comments of the Executive Committee

This proposal is VERY sketchy. Only 3 participants are identified. The proposal makes no reference to earlier panels in undergrad linguistics, which is extremely disappointing: there should be some sense of cumulative effort on the part of the committee. The authors of the proposal need to do some research on panels focusing on teaching undergraduate linguistics over the past few LSA annual meetings.

To be accepted, the revised proposal must include complete and thematically linked abstracts from all participants. Next, it needs a basic idea beyond “we have to do something about undergraduate education”. The one idea it contains, Liberman’s, refers to an institutional difference between psychology and linguistics (psychology is many times the larger field, it has links to standardized testing, students know about it coming out of high school). There is no promise that L’s talk will have more to offer than the prescription that linguistics become more like psychology.

The title also seems uninformative: maybe “Attracting undergraduate majors to linguistics” would be better. The proposal should also include reasons why attracting more majors to linguistics would be beneficial for individual departments or for the field as a whole - this may seem obvious, but the needs of the LSA membership are diverse. Perhaps the proposed second part would be better handled by the Advisory Committee.

The Program Committee is eager to have initiatives for improving undergraduate linguistics education receive foundation funding. Right now, that is the main factor the proposal has going for it.
To support our effort to fulfill all the tasks laid out in the committee’s mission statement: (1) developing undergraduate programs and majors, (2) promoting linguistics courses as part of general education curricula, and (3) conveying the value of linguistics courses to students, faculty (including other linguistics faculty), administrations, parents, etc., we urge the Society to:

1. Invite presidents and members of undergraduate linguistics clubs to the annual meeting. Formal invitations will make it possible for these people to get travel funds from their deans.

2. Add a session at the Annual Meeting in which undergraduates in linguistics could present their research. Presenters would submit abstracts in the usual way but would be evaluated separately from other abstracts.

3. Fund the development of a website for discussing the committee’s mission. Chip Gerfen, a present member of the committee, has already set up a trial version of the site, for use by members of the committee, but modest funds are needed to pay a student to complete the design and implementation. We envision the website as being a forum for discussion by all interested people of the undergraduate education in linguistics, particularly including undergraduate students of linguistics themselves. We also ask the Society to host a link to the site on its homepage as well as direct interested people to it.

4. Consider applying to the NSF, Pew, or other similar sources for funding to support a symposium and eventually a research/demonstration project on teaching linguistics to undergraduates. This is actually not a request to the Executive Committee to do anything at this time other than be prepared to support such an application by the Undergraduate Program Advisory Committee.