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**Plenary Address**
**California C**
**12:30 – 1:30 PM**

# The Future of Linguistics

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About 10 years ago, a publisher's representative told me that introductory linguistics courses in the U.S. enroll 50,000 students per year while introductory psychology courses enroll about 1,500,000, or 30 times more. The Linguistic Society of America has about 4,000 members while the American Psychological Association has more than 150,000 members, or about 38 times more. Comparisons between linguistics and fields like history or chemistry give similar results.

It's easy to accept this state of affairs as natural, but in fact it's bizarre, both historically and logically. Furthermore, it's part of a larger and much more serious problem. Those who are resigned to the fate of our academic discipline should still be disturbed that contemporary intellectuals learn almost no skills for analyzing the form and content of speech and text, so that few writing instructors can even identify instances of the passive voice that they urge their students to avoid. More seriously, the teaching of reading is so widely based on false or nonsensical ideas about speech and language that a quarter of all students emerge from elementary school with difficulties serious enough to interfere with the rest of their education.

To break the grip of familiarity, it may help to view the past 150 years of intellectual history as a poker game. The academic disciplines concerned with speech and language began with a bigger stake than almost anyone else at the table and have been dealt a series of very strong hands. However, the role of linguistic research and teaching in English, foreign languages, and anthropology is dramatically smaller than it once was, and the field of linguistics itself is a marginal player, in danger of being busted out of the game entirely.

I review our unfortunate past and discuss the prospects for a brighter future, in which linguistics might reach parity with fields like mathematics, psychology, and English.

**Mark Liberman** (PhD, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1975) worked for AT&T Bell Laboratories from 1975-990, ending as head of the Linguistics Research Department. He then moved to the University of Pennsylvania as Trustee Professor of Phonetics in Linguistics, with a secondary appointment in the Department of Computer and Information Science. He has been the director of the Linguistic Data Consortium since its foundation in 1992 and was co-director of the Institute for Research in Cognitive Science from 2000-2006. He is also Faculty Master of Ware College House and faculty director of College Houses and Academic Services at Penn. In 2003, he co-founded "Language Log", which now averages more than 7,000 readers a day. His recent research has been in information extraction from biomedical text and in the prosody of conversational speech.