

1. Resolution: To Adopt the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression

Date: April 27, 2022

Proponents/Sponsors: Noam Chomsky, Sabine Iatridou, Pauline Jacobson, Jason Merchant, Pritty Patel-Grosz, Yael Sharvit, Philippe Schlenker, Tim Stowell, Harold Torrence, Charles Yang.

LSA Executive Committee Action: Referred to the membership for consideration without recommendation for adoption or rejection

Comment Period: 30 Days (To post comments, please use the comment button at the very bottom of this page. Members must be logged in to make comments in this forum.)

Date of Ballot: TBD

Text of the resolution:

Whereas the LSA's mission is to promote the scientific study of language, and such study can thrive only where academic freedom is protected; and

Whereas autocratic regimes and governments, both around the world and in the United States, currently seek to restrict the freedom of speech, of teaching, and of inquiry; and

Whereas the LSA has recently endorsed a statement by the American Historical Association on threats to academic conferences, standing up to harassment and intimidation of academics on the basis of their work and views; and

Whereas the adoption of a suitable version of the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression would give those entrusted with organizing and implementing LSA-affiliated activities a supportive framework for carrying them out;

Therefore be it resolved that the Linguistic Society of America adopt the following version of the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression (as adapted for the LSA):

Whereas the LSA's mission is to promote the scientific study of language, and such study can thrive only where academic freedom is protected; and

Whereas autocratic regimes and governments, both around the world and in the United States, currently seek to restrict the freedom of speech, of teaching, and of inquiry; and

Whereas the LSA has recently endorsed a statement by the American Historical Association on threats to academic conferences, standing up to harassment and intimidation of academics on the basis of their work and views; and

Whereas the adoption of a suitable version of the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression would give those entrusted with organizing and implementing LSA affiliated activities a supportive framework for carrying them out;

Therefore be it resolved that the Linguistic Society of America adopt the following version of the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression (as adapted for the LSA):

Because the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) is committed to free and open inquiry in all matters, it guarantees all members of the LSA community the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn. Except insofar as limitations on that freedom are necessary to the functioning of the Society, the LSA fully respects and supports the freedom of all members of the LSA community “to discuss any problem that presents itself.”

Of course, the ideas of different members of the LSA community will often and quite naturally conflict. But it is not the proper role of the Society to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Although the LSA greatly values civility, and although all members of the LSA community share in the responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community.

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. The Society may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the Society. In addition, the LSA may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the Society. But these are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, and it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the Society’s commitment to a completely free and open discussion of ideas.

In a word, the LSA’s fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the LSA community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the individual members of the LSA community, not for LSA as an institution, to make those judgments for themselves, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose. Indeed, fostering the ability of members of the

LSA community to engage in such debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of the LSA's educational mission.

As a corollary to the Society's commitment to protect and promote free expression, members of the LSA community must also act in conformity with the principle of free expression. Although members of the LSA community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed in academic, professional, and other settings, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe. To this end, the Society has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it.

2. Update from the LSA

On May 2nd, 12.32pm EST, the LSA withdrew the resolution (see the signatories' response for details.)

3. Response from the signatories

We thank the many LSA members who took the time to engage with our resolution on freedom of expression and provided comments in good faith, including many critical ones (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220502194008/www.linguisticsociety.org/content/resolution-adopt-chicago-principles-freedom-expression>). We greatly value the thoughtful comments, which have encouraged us to once again reflect on some of the important issues and concerns that were raised.

Although the resolution on freedom of expression has been withdrawn by the LSA Executive Committee, we reply nonetheless in the interest of constructive debate, to what we take to be the main substantive objections and questions raised, at a length that the resolution format itself did not permit (while disregarding comments that we take to be ad hominem and/or defamatory). Conducting this debate in a completely civil and respectful manner seems to us to have great intrinsic value for the field.

We believe that opponents and proponents of the resolution share the view that each of us should do our bit to improve the climate and civility in our field, and to make it more welcoming of diverse individuals and viewpoints. Naturally, what constitutes advancement in the field may give rise to vigorous disagreements. We start from the assumption that the exchange around our resolution instantiates reasonable disagreement. In our view, setting a tone of civility and mutual respect in such debates is one way in which we can help our field thrive, improve, and become more inclusive.

While the identity of the signatories should not have affected the evaluation of the resolution, we take this opportunity to point out that we are a diverse group: the majority are members of at least one group that has been traditionally underrepresented, marginalized, or minoritized in academia, be it along ethnic, racial, gender, sexual-orientation, first-generational, national origin, or religious lines, and have experienced adversity or discrimination within and outside of academia, ranging from mild to extraordinarily severe; some of us still continue to do so. Though the details of these lived experiences inform our views on freedom of expression, we do not view them as determinative or as central to the current discussion. But they should help allay any suspicion in good faith that the resolution on freedom of expression was in any way inspired by an animus to diversity.

It should be clear that freedom of expression is a bedrock principle of democracy and of scientific debate. It has also been instrumental to the success of social movements (labor organizing, civil rights, religious tolerance, resistance to authoritarian governments, human rights advocacy). We are aware that the term ‘free speech’ has been used as a dog-whistle by some who encourage or endorse hateful or derogatory speech. We wish to make emphatically clear that we do not follow this use, and that we support the goals of work that aims for diversity and inclusion in the field. In other words, we do not intend ‘freedom of expression’ to be a code for ‘hateful speech’, but as the free expression of even possibly controversial ideas, as long as this is done in a civil and professional way.

In what follows, we make some general clarifications. We respond to what we take to be the most substantive questions and concerns that were raised, and explain why we proposed a resolution on freedom of expression.

1. General clarifications

The signatories wish to make two points of general clarification.

- i. We wish to clarify that at no point did we withdraw the resolution or intend to do so. Rather, the Executive Committee of the LSA voted to withdraw the resolution on the basis of having (to quote the text from their email) “unwittingly misinterpreted the procedures” in connection to resolutions [see endnote 1]. The signatories of the resolution were not consulted or notified in advance, and only learned of the outcome when the Executive Committee notified the LSA membership by email.
- ii. Due to a missed reconfirmation email, a colleague who had supported the proposal on freedom of expression when it was first submitted to the Executive Committee had accidentally been left off the resolution: we wish to semi-correct this error by mentioning here that Rajesh Bhatt also intended to be a signatory on the resolution.

2. How does the resolution relate to the LSA's goals to make the field more inclusive?

The signatories support the LSA's work on making the field more inclusive, and do not see such inclusivity work to be in conflict with the expression of controversial ideas where such ideas are expressed in a civil and professional manner. The resolution does not diminish members' rights to point out and seek redress from harassment or personal attacks, or members' rights to present challenges to expression that is threatening or defamatory. It also does not impede or alter the LSA's responsibility to act on such complaints. It merely reaffirms a commitment to the open debate of ideas.

We would like to emphasize that the bedrock principle of freedom of expression is important in connection with inclusiveness as well. The proposed resolution can help work toward inclusivity by ensuring that those facing discrimination or who are the targets of bias are protected by freedom of expression to point out such discrimination or bias. Without such safeguarding, the very principle of diversity we care about is weakened.

3. Is this resolution in response to something in particular?

There was no single precipitating event or incident for us to propose the resolution at this time (and in particular no such event within US linguistics.) The issues addressed by the resolution have been gaining in importance over the past few years, and have lost none of their urgency, in our view. We see the LSA and the signals that it sends as important both within the United States and internationally. In recent years, academic freedom of expression has been under attack both in and outside of academia, in different institutions, US states and countries, accompanied by legislative or other action to prohibit teaching and research on certain topics, for example anti-LGBT laws and laws restricting the teaching of issues related to race. US academia has seen its share of such actions as well, across the political spectrum.

Freedom of expression and academic freedom are also cornerstones of the ethos of science. Recent years have seen an erosion in the public's trust in science and universities, both within the US and around the globe. The resolution's aim was to strengthen the status of linguistics as a science: freedom of debate is an essential part of it.

Some colleagues have questioned whether this was an ideal time for a resolution on freedom of expression. We are not convinced that there will be a *better* time to propose such a resolution, as attacks on freedom of expression have only been mounting across fields, states, and countries, and show no signs of abating.

4. In what circumstances would this policy be relevant?

There are sometimes communities or individuals that are hostile to linguistic work on language policy, language history, claims of genetic relatedness among languages, analyses of the semantics and pragmatics of pronoun use, the phonetics of the speech of sexual, racial, religious,

ethnic, and other minorities, the status of dialects, lexicography and standardization, swear words and derogatory language, and many other topics that linguists investigate. As a national professional organization, the LSA sets a standard, and organizers of local workshops, conferences and seminar series that may host students or others giving talks on subjects or arguing for conclusions that may be controversial can rely on the LSA's positions to guide them, even if they are in a venue, academic or otherwise, that does not have similar protections.

We have seen local organizers adopt the LSA's models for running conferences; we would hope they could similarly rely on this resolution. A local conference organizer could rely on the LSA and its endorsement of the Chicago Principles to defend their conference from pressures to restrict topics, speakers, or conclusions.

5. What good is a resolution without an enforcement mechanism? And what would happen to members/individuals who violate the Chicago Principles?

The Chicago Principles are intended as a statement of general principles concerning freedom of expression. Importantly, the Chicago Principles as adapted for the LSA would not have been a code of conduct, and the intention was not that the LSA should start policing what can be said. The principles are conceived of as guidelines for the best possible application of the scientific method as it pertains to linguistics as a science, which requires open discussion and a diversity of viewpoints. Questions of enforceability thus do not arise, and enforceability is in no way entailed by the nature of LSA resolutions. The LSA has passed many resolutions, and the question of how they are to be enforced, if at all, has not to our knowledge previously been raised or considered necessary in assessing them.

We acknowledge the complexity and difficulty of the issues that our field is currently facing, and there are no perfect solutions, including the Chicago Principles. Ultimately, progress will depend on our community's ability to recognize and support expressions that contribute to the advancement of our field, and to maintain its civility and inclusiveness.

6. Are the signatories of this resolution the same as those who brought forward two other, unrelated, proposals that were mentioned in the Executive Committee minutes of January 6, 2022?

There is only a small overlap between the signatories on the resolution on freedom of expression and the set of signatories on either of the other two proposals. Since the present reply only concerns the resolution on freedom of expression, we cannot engage with details of the other two, confidential proposals. Moreover, the other two proposals were rejected by the Executive Committee and are thus irrelevant to the present discussion. But for clarity, we would like to stress that those proposals were mentioned in a highly condensed form in the LSA minutes, in a way that may easily be misconstrued [see endnote 2]. Proposal 3 ('Perspectives articles and opinion/commentary') primarily pertained to clarifying the *distinction* between scientific articles

and social commentary and their respective refereeing processes, not to the *prohibition* of social commentary. Proposal 2 (re ‘collecting and reporting of demographic information’) pointed out the substantial legal risks associated with the collection, safeguarding, and protection of highly sensitive personal data (e.g., on sexual orientation) in light of potential misuse and danger to linguists who are from, work, or travel in countries where the collected data, if leaked, could open them to legal prosecution or worse. The resolution on freedom of expression is not tied to these rejected proposals.

7. Endnote

[en. 1] The email sent out to the LSA membership to notify the members of this decision stated that the LSA’s Executive Committee (EC) “voted unanimously to withdraw the resolution”, and elaborated as follows: “We had interpreted the wording ‘approve or reject’ to mean ‘approve or reject for sending out for a membership vote.’ Having now received the benefit of explicit parliamentary clarification, as well as comments by numerous LSA members who described somewhat similar, if not identical, concerns in their written responses on the resolution, we now understand that ‘approve or reject’ has to be interpreted as ‘support or turn down.’ The EC, therefore, voted on the resolution and, without a dissenting vote, decided to reject it and therefore withdraw it.”

[en. 2] The LSA EC committee corrected their minutes from their January 6 meeting, indicating that the 3 proposals were from different groups:

<https://www.linguisticsociety.org/about/what-we-do/reports/executive-committee-minutes>

The link to the minutes can be found from the following link, which indicates that they were corrected on May 11.

https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/Minutes%20Jan%20%2722%20EC%20Meeting%20corrected_0.pdf