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Citation for published version:

Kastner, I, Kotek, H, Anonymous, Dockum, R & Dow, M 2021 'Who speaks for us? Lessons from the Pinker letter'. <<https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/005381/>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

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Who speaks for us? Lessons from the Pinker letter*

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Abstract

Since its publication in July 2020, the Open Letter to the LSA regarding Steven Pinker has evoked many passionate reactions. This commentary discusses the letter's reception within the field of linguistics and outside of it, in news outlets as well as on social media, from the viewpoint of junior scholars who are greatly troubled by its aftermath. We document a thorough timeline of events, and go on to show a one-sided coverage of the letter in the mainstream media, including demonstrable falsehoods concerning the letter, its signatories, and the LSA itself. We then show how, within linguistics, reaction from some senior colleagues has focused on general calls for good-will, without addressing the sources of disagreement. Our conclusion is that the field has failed to hear and represent the views of many members, and so we trace the reasons for this non-engagement.

Keywords: discipline of linguistics, power structures, linguistics in the media

*We acknowledge three co-authors who chose to remain anonymous. We also thank David Adger, Karlos Arregi, Mateus Barros, Hagit Borer, Claire Bower, Lauren Clemens, Daniel Duncan, Martín Fuchs, Carrie Gillon, Laura Grestenberger, Heidi Harley, Pauline Jacobson, Barbara H. Partee, David Pesetsky, Jessica Rett, Elise Stickles, Gary Thoms, Adina Williams, Michelle Yuan, one colleague who chose to remain anonymous and the many other colleagues who shared their thoughts and encouragement with us, as well as three anonymous reviewers and the *Language* editors. The detailed feedback provided by Andries Coetzee improved the paper substantially. Submitted 24 August 2020; first revision invited 14 November 2020; revision received 11 January 2021; second revision invited 11 February 2021; revision received 22 February 2021; third revision invited 5 April 2021; revision received 19 April 2021; fourth revision invited 1 May 2021; submission withdrawn 13 May 2021; withdrawn submission acknowledged 23 May 2021.

1. INTRODUCTION. The field of linguistics was recently shaken by an open letter submitted to the Linguistic Society of America on behalf of over 600 signatories (Open Letter to the LSA 2020, henceforth TOL). TOL argues that public statements made by Steven Pinker are inconsistent with values that the LSA publicly espouses, and therefore asks LSA leadership to revoke his status as LSA Fellow and to remove him from its list of Media Experts.

Since TOL appeared, the field has witnessed vigorous debates surrounding not only the status of its claims, but also broader issues of hierarchy and power. It has highlighted a divide between (mostly) junior linguists, for whom the examples in TOL are illustrative of a broader pattern of behavior, and (mostly) senior linguists, who took the specific tweets made by Pinker as identified in the letter to be the entirety of the issue at hand. The perceived merit of TOL thus varied significantly between these groups.

Much of this debate has taken place on social media, in networks which not all linguists have access to, and in various news outlets. This commentary aims to refocus the conversation on issues internal to the linguistics community, using a venue geared to linguists. Our goal is not to rehash the content of TOL, but rather to discuss its reception from the viewpoint of junior scholars who are troubled by its aftermath. These are matters of import for all linguists, beyond the confines of the LSA and beyond the academic sphere of the United States.

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 and colleagues 2020). In particular, we draw on the passage below from the LSA's recent Statement on Race (emphasis ours). We maintain that practices such as those outlined here remain our charge as linguists even when they take place outside of the academic discipline proper.

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)

In what follows, Section 2 provides a thorough timeline of events surrounding TOL. Section 3 reviews the reaction by Pinker and his associates; their major claims are refuted in Section 4. We then provide a brief discussion of broader issues stemming from TOL in Section 5, arguing that the field's institutions have failed to represent the views of many members, most of whom are junior. Additional analysis of the discourse surrounding TOL can be found in Kastner and colleagues 2020. The authors of the current paper are not the authors of TOL, who chose to remain anonymous.

2. THE TOL TIMELINE. This section provides a summary of the origins of TOL, its circulation, and reactions to it both within and beyond the field of linguistics. Here we focus on facts surrounding the writing and circulation of the letter and the initial response to it, drawing from published sources as well as personal communication. We refer the reader to Adger 2020, Esipova 2020, Green 2020, Rett 2020a, Snider 2020, and Stalley 2020 for favorable views, and Adams 2020, Coyne 2020a, and Partee 2020 for critical discussion.

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 anonymous authors, was inspired by the 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). TOL 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 they selected 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, and multiple social media posts about it started to appear.¹

¹For consistency and convenience, all times reported in this paper refer to Pacific Daylight Time.

Within 72 hours, over 500 signatures had been collected, and a vigorous debate had begun on social media. The letter was only open to signatures over a single weekend, which coincided with a US holiday: Friday July 3 to Monday July 6. It was submitted to the LSA Executive Committee on July 6. We detail next the sudden and substantial public attention that TOL received, leading its authors (p.c.) to such a quick transition from creation to submission.

2.2. EARLY PUBLICITY TRIGGERS ATTACKS AND LEADS TO EARLY SUBMISSION. TOL initially appeared in 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*,² retweeted a tweet by 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). Two *Quillette* editors, Toby Young (Young 2020) and Jonathan Kay (Kay 2020), joined Hanania in attacking the letter. Circulation and publicity were further expanded when Steven Pinker tweeted TOL to his over 660,000 Twitter followers on the afternoon of July 5, 2020 in a tweet thread (Pinker 2020a,b):

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[ith] 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 (re-)retweeted content about TOL 12 more times that day and 10 additional times on July

²Lester 2018 identifies *Quillette* as one of the primary vehicles for what is known as the “Intellectual Dark Web . . . 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.

6, 2020. By this date, five linguists had been quoted or retweeted by Pinker.³ These tweets include the following defense from John McWhorter, Chair of the LSA Public Relations Committee at the time, on July 5, 2020 (McWhorter 2020):

*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]

At this point, TOL had left the realm of linguistics. One consequence of this broader attention was attacks on its signatories. These took various forms, including public threats and attacks on social media, as well as emails sent directly to signatories and to the anonymous email address created by TOL writers; some of these attacks have been archived in our Online Appendix.

Another consequence was that fake signatures began to be added to the letter, including the names of several working linguists added without their consent. Other signatures ran the gamut from (British comedian) “Richard Herring” to “Adolf Hitler.”⁴ Once the extent of the signature interference came to the attention of the letter writers, the signature submission form was taken down and the writers proceeded to manually verify each extant signature. This process soon turned out to be unsustainable, and attacks on signatories made it difficult to properly debate TOL any further. 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.).

An anonymous reviewer and the Editor asked about abuse levied at Pinker in the aftermath of TOL. We are able to recount more or less exhaustively the attacks on TOL and its signatories

³Charleen Adams, Iris Berent, Edward Gibson, McWhorter and Barbara H. Partee. Between July 2020 and the time of publication, certain tweets may have been deleted or made private. More generally, retweets without commentary cannot be cited via URLs. We have, however, documented and confirmed all these tweets and all other claims of retweets, which are shared in the Supplementary Materials.

⁴In personal communication with TOL writers, we were told that fake signatures started appearing within an hour of Lehmann’s tweet. In total, 48 signatures were identified as fake (e.g., *Viva Pinker*, *Mao Zedong*, etc.). More information can be found in our Online Appendix, though we do not include the names of real individuals that were added without their consent.

because of personal communication and our access to the relevant documents. While the large size of Pinker’s Twitter following is prohibitive to an in-depth look at the matter, negative replies to Pinker’s tweets from the same period (early July 2020) can be found, criticizing him based on TOL or criticizing his response to TOL. It is not surprising that disagreements arise in a debate; what we document here is the *abuse* levelled by Pinker and his supporters. We do not wish to imply that Pinker and his supporters have not received abuse online, though any abuse they have received does not appear to be related to commenters’ opinions regarding TOL. Many negative replies to Pinker’s tweets from this period bring up accusations which are irrelevant to the current discussion and none appear to be statements about TOL. We are not aware of any public statement made by Pinker or McWhorter about verbal abuse surrounding TOL beyond those cited here.

We are not in a position to quantify the ratio of positive to negative comments that Pinker himself received publicly—impressionistically, however, we consulted the threads cited in this paper and found negative comments to be in the minority—nor do we have information about abuse levied towards Pinker or his supporters in private interactions. Finally, we cannot currently gauge to what degree, if any, TOL directly caused an increase in verbal abuse towards Pinker and his supporters. While these are fair questions, they are outside the scope of this paper, which has as an express goal to document the circumstances surrounding the submission of TOL as well as the experiences of junior scholars, especially those who do not normally have the large audience and media contacts that Pinker and some of his supporters benefit from.

2.3. THE LSA’S RESPONSE. On July 8, the LSA Executive Committee (EC) issued a statement to its membership entitled, “LSA reaffirms commitment to intellectual freedom and professional responsibility” (LSA Executive Committee 2020b). This statement does not mention TOL, but was nonetheless taken by many to be a response to it, as it states 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 further announced the establishment of two task forces, one on “nominations, awards, appointments, and elections” and the other on

“communications via social media and other means,” whose work would be reported in the 2021 Annual Meeting.

Pinker took this message to signal the support of the LSA.⁵ In a tweet thread from July 8 (Pinker 2020d,e,f), 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 sympathetic to TOL expressed their discontent with the LSA's July 8 response. In addition to individual posts on social media (e.g., Borer 2020a), we are aware of 15 letters delivered to the EC; one such letter has been made public (Punske 2020). Some of the common criticisms voiced against this response include its failure to mention TOL (which was potentially confusing to LSA members who had not been aware of TOL), its vagueness and focus on “intellectual freedom” rather than the issues raised by TOL, and its lack of transparency concerning the task forces. The LSA first acknowledged TOL, via email to TOL's authors, three (LSA Executive Committee 2020c) or four days later on Friday, July 10, 2020 (addendum to Open Letter to the LSA 2020).

By July 15, 2020, the LSA had reorganized its Media Experts page. In particular, the category “general,” previously appearing at the top of the page and containing the names of Steven Pinker and one other linguist (Donna Jo Napoli), had been renamed “varia/general” and moved to the very

⁵The LSA's statement came with an automatically generated salutation addressing recipients by name. As suggested by the Editor, it is possible that Pinker—and, consequently, his followers unaffiliated with the LSA—initially interpreted this message as being sent to him personally. We remain agnostic regarding such an interpretation, but note that if that had indeed been the case, it would have meant that the mistaken impression has deliberately not been corrected in the meantime.

end of the page.⁶ On July 17, 2020, the page was taken down completely; as of this writing, the Media Experts page has been removed entirely while it is being re-evaluated by the LSA.

On July 17, 2020, the EC issued a second statement to its membership (LSA Executive Committee 2020c). This response does mention TOL, but does not provide a link to the letter itself. The message seeks to correct “certain misunderstandings and misinformation,” without referring to any specific instances thereof, by saying 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 new task forces, and notes that the Media Experts page had been removed from the LSA website. It 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 EC officially announced the appointment of the two task forces, their full memberships, and charges (LSA Executive Committee 2020d): A task force on media resources and a task force on procedures for evaluating professional conduct. Prior to presenting their recommendations at the 2021 Annual Meeting, the EC 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 linguistics, many op-eds and editorials appeared in international media. These include articles and interviews with Pinker in

⁶Both before and after this change, Pinker appeared first on the list, even though Napoli would be alphabetized before him. Therefore, Pinker was the very first name on the Media Experts page prior to TOL.

The New York Times (Powell 2020), *The Atlantic* (Friedersdorf 2020), *Mother Jones* (King 2020), *The Telegraph* (Stanley 2020), *The Times* (Whitworth 2020), *BBC Radio 4* (Montague 2020), *Reason* (Bailey 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.

Few linguists were interviewed and subsequently quoted in these articles, with the exception of McWhorter (Friedersdorf 2020; Powell 2020) and Charleen Adams (Córdova 2020; Friedersdorf 2020), who both expressed views in support of Pinker.⁷ At least three linguists who were interviewed for these same pieces and expressed views in support of TOL were not mentioned (Gillon and Figueroa 2020; Hammerly 2020; Rett 2020b).

Further, TOL signatories and others who support their views have been unable to publish op-eds in national media outlets. These include at least three linguists (Daniel Duncan, Caitlin Green, and Jessica Rett, p.c.), who have approached the following venues: *Inside Higher Ed*, *Slate*, *The Atlantic*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Conversation*, *The Guardian* and *Vox*. Perhaps the sole exception is Joseph McVeigh, who was interviewed by the radio program *W Radio Colombia* (W 2020).

3. PINKER’S RESPONSE. Steven Pinker’s response to TOL has been confined to social media and news outlets. In this section, we survey the three main components of his response to TOL.

3.1. CLAIM #1: THE LETTER WAS REJECTED. On July 8, 2020, Pinker publicly claimed that the LSA “received the petition, considered it over the weekend, and just *repudiated* it” (Pinker 2020d, emphasis ours), citing the LSA’s first email to its membership (LSA Executive Committee 2020b). He 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 2020j, emphasis ours), and again in another tweet, stating that “the Linguistics [sic] Society of America *rebuffed* the petition” (Pinker 2020k, emphasis ours).

⁷Powell 2020 quoted Adger 2020 and quoted Jason Merchant’s contribution to Partee 2020 without citing Partee herself. Two signatories of TOL who were approached by Powell did not comment, and another one was quoted based on a tweet (Powell 2020).

This claim was repeated in several news outlets. 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 2020). *Die Welt am Sonntag* reported on an interview with Pinker, stating that “The Linguistic Society of America rejected the petition” (Delius 2020, translation ours). Then President of the LSA Marianne Mithun was implicated as well when Pinker was quoted by *The Telegraph*:

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)

3.2. CLAIM #2: SUPPORT FOR THE LETTER IS INSIGNIFICANT. A second claim from Pinker casts the signatories as junior and not representative of the field. On July 5, 2020, in his first public comment about TOL, Pinker implored: “Don’t blame established linguists: I recognize only one name among the signatories” (Pinker 2020b). In the same thread, Pinker (2020c) linked to a critical article which claimed that “Many of the signatories are grad students and undergrads” (Coyne 2020a).

Pinker also repeated these assertions in interviews: “Very few of [the names] were well-known linguists” (Sayers 2020, 1:20); and “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). He repeated this as recently as December 2020, stating in an interview with *The Sun* that the signatories were “several hundred grad students and postdocs” (Edginton 2020). In this context, the presence of fake signatures on TOL in its early publication stages was significant, as it was used by Pinker as an additional means of discrediting TOL (Pinker 2020a; Sayers 2020).

A combination of claims #1 and #2 is found in a story on *Campus Reform* on July 31, 2020:

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

3.3. CLAIM #3: THE LETTER IS A "CANCELLATION" ATTEMPT. The final claim consists of two parts: (a) TOL constitutes an attempt to "cancel" Pinker; and (b) such attempts will intimidate more junior members, causing them to fear retribution or termination for their own views. The following tweet thread exemplifies this sentiment:

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 2020q,r)

Pinker retweeted several articles and interviews promoting this claim. Some examples are noted here:

- 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 (2020l)
- The Forehead-Slappingly Stupid Attempt to Cancel Steven Pinker (VerBruggen 2020); tweeted by Pinker (2020o)
- Steven Pinker - The man who refused to be cancelled (Stanley 2020); tweeted by Pinker (2020p)

Pinker additionally retweeted several articles that refer to a perceived danger to young scholars, who may feel intimidated by the attack on a prominent scholar. For example, “Steven Pinker won’t be canceled — but you could be” (Cammack 2020), tweeted by Pinker (2020m). Concerning an article in *The Atlantic* (Friedersdorf 2020), Pinker tweeted: “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 2020s).

4. REFUTING PINKER’S CLAIMS. In this section, we challenge Pinker’s claims described above.

4.1. THE LETTER HAS NOT BEEN REJECTED. Despite Pinker’s numerous claims that TOL has been evaluated by the LSA and rejected by it, this claim is false, as stated by the LSA itself: “[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). Moreover, while it is true that then LSA President Mithun did not express any sympathy for TOL, she did not express any opposition either, given that she issued no public statement.

The removal of the Media Experts list from the LSA website and the creation of task forces charged with (a) rethinking the LSA’s media strategy and (b) creating a formal process for lodging complaints against current LSA members can clearly be interpreted as a response to the requests in TOL. We take Pinker’s de facto removal from the Media Experts page — as part of the process of restructuring the page — to reflect the LSA’s consideration, if not acceptance, of one of the two requests in TOL (while we are fairly certain of this interpretation, TOL was not given as a reason in LSA Executive Committee 2020b). At the least, in the wake of TOL, the LSA determined the Media Experts list and the process by which Media Experts are selected to necessitate thorough reconsideration.

4.2. SUPPORT FOR THE LETTER IS NOT INSIGNIFICANT. We next refute the claim that TOL’s signatories are mostly junior. More importantly, we strongly reject the notion that the opinions of

	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

junior members of the field are negligible and do not represent sentiments in the field (see also Arregi and colleagues 2020). In addition, while we cannot account for what Pinker has or has not read, we can confidently assert that public defenses of TOL are widespread: Borer 2020b documents 24 public statements, posts, and podcasts expressing a favorable view of TOL.

4.2.1. SIGNATORIES BY ACADEMIC RANK. Since TOL is public, we conducted an informal analysis of the academic ranks of its signatories. In total, 620 signatures were analyzed; we provide a few notes on our methodology and the overall trends.

Each signatory’s academic rank was identified: many signatories provided job titles, and others were added according to internet searches and personal communication.⁸ Where no easy decision could be made, the datapoint was discarded. This methodology resulted in 606 classified signatories, as shown in Table 1. All aggregate results are available online at <https://tinyurl.com/yxd22mlk>.⁹

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. We additionally consider our colleagues working in industry or in alt-academic roles to be “professional” linguists.

We next compared the makeup of signatories to the general makeup of the LSA membership. 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

⁸Titles 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.

⁹This spreadsheet includes similarly calculated totals for the signatories to the Facebook post by Jacobson, Pesetsky, and Partee (Pesetsky 2020) discussed in Section 5.4. We note that our findings have been replicated in a similar analysis conducted in Dow 2020.

	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

Non-tenure-track, Pre-tenure, and Tenured/retired into one category, “All Faculty,” we arrive at the comparison in Table 2.

We conclude that the ratios are overall fairly similar. Therefore, the TOL signatories constitute a reasonable representation of the LSA membership at large, as far as career stage is concerned.

4.2.2. SIGNATORIES BY SENIORITY. Another method of evaluating Pinker’s claim is to focus on individuals rather than groups. We thus ask how recognizable senior signatories are, as name recognition is likely to increase with seniority. Seven other LSA Fellows are themselves signatories: Karlos Arregi, Mary Beckman, Hagit Borer, Claire Bower, Andrew Garrett, Heidi Harley and Salikoko S. Mufwene. 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; for example, the list includes 19 scholars who meet the notability guidelines of English Wikipedia and have articles at the time of writing.^{10, 11}

4.3. FRAMING OF TOL AS “CANCELLATION” IS OPPORTUNISTIC. Originating as a method of accountability praxis in Black communities, and now widely adopted in the digital sphere, scholars have noted that “cancellation” has undergone “narrativiz[ation]. . . into a moral panic akin to actual

¹⁰Adger, Beckman, Bender, Borer, Bower, Clopper, Coon, Cowper, Gal, Garrett, Harley, Kiesling, Mufwene, Munson, Piggott, Reiss, B. Smith, Travis and M. Vihman. We take this to be one — but not the only — measure of recognizability.

¹¹The time-stamps shared with us by the TOL writers (p.c.) indicate that most senior signatories had signed within the first 72 hours; Pinker’s claims regarding seniority continued for weeks and even months later (e.g., Montague 2020; Edginton 2020).

harm” (Clark 2020: 89), which may inspire observers to take defensive action on behalf of public figures experiencing criticism. Reframing TOL as a “cancellation” campaign created opportunities for audiences to misconstrue TOL as a demand for material damage to Pinker, as can readily be observed in public and private reactions. For instance, author Michael Shermer stated in reaction to Powell 2020:

Note undercurrent [sic] in this article that reveals the true motive of cancel culture: destroy the lives & livelihood of anyone who doesn't perfectly fit the orthodoxy. (Shermer 2020)

The themes surrounding the discussion of TOL (e.g., military siege, authoritarianism, and religion; see Section 5.2) exemplify the reproduction of cancellation discourse and its intersection with power, and as such, warrant a detailed analysis which is beyond the scope of this paper. See also Isackson 2020 and Kastner et al. 2020 for discussion.

5. DISCUSSION. Before concluding, we expand on four points in which we draw lessons from the debate surrounding TOL.

5.1. RECONSIDERING JUNIOR SCHOLARS. As noted above, it has been suggested 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 that are already at a hierarchical disadvantage.

Given the less prominent status of junior scholars, the message that their opinions are not important discourages them from publicly voicing opinions and is thus more likely to result in “cancelling” than criticism of more senior scholars. As Arregi et al. 2020 puts it, “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.”

Similar points were made by Ramchand 2020, which 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 puts it, "[t]he 'younger' generation, of which our own junior scholars are part . . . deserve support. Much more than that, they deserve respect." Even if every single signatory of the letter were an unestablished linguist, it would still stand to reason that TOL's argument should be evaluated on its own merits, not on the merits of its signatories' CV, and that those voices should be heard.

5.2. ATTACKS ON SIGNATORIES. Beyond the question of seniority, Pinker and his supporters have made direct attacks on TOL signatories in the form of insults. We focus here on statements by Pinker and McWhorter as they are senior figures in our field, and by Coyne, a biologist who documented his extensive correspondence with Pinker. In a July 25 interview, Pinker stated that the signatories' criticisms were "out to lunch" and "delusional," and alluding to a statement on TOL made by journalist Matt Taibbi (Taibbi 2020) (which Pinker also re-tweeted), suggested that their research was similar to "excited Christians who see images of Jesus in tree stumps and wall mold" (Park and Bagaria 2020, 30:25; Pinker 2020i). In a July 6 tweet, McWhorter called signatories "demons at the gates" (2020). Coyne described signatories as "misguided zealots" (Coyne 2020a); in a follow-up post in response to Powell 2020, he called them "yellow-bellied cowards" (Coyne 2020b).

Metaphors of violence are omnipresent in the discourse surrounding TOL. The letter was "a shot across the bow" (Sayers 2020, 3:55), it is part of the "war against liberalism," (Bailey 2020), and it is an "attack" (e.g., Whitworth 2020) seeking to "get [Pinker]...defrocked, smacked in the face" (as McWhorter claimed in Loury and McWhorter 2020, 20:40), or "defenestrate[d]" (McWhorter 2020). Such hyperbolic language is bolstered as well by literary and historical allusions to McCarthyism (Brown 2020), Stalinism (Coyne 2020a) and Orwellian authoritarianism (Whitworth 2020). We document here several additional attacks on the signatories. Some come from personal communication with TOL authors; others are documented in our 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 for a last supper.”

To date, Pinker has not publicly indicated disapproval of the attacks, many of which his Twitter account was tagged in. He signalled support for McWhorter’s and Coyne’s characterizations of the signatories by tweeting links to Coyne’s posts (Pinker 2020c,n) and retweeting McWhorter’s “demons” tweet. His characterization of TOL signatories as largely students and other vulnerable academics (Sections 3.2, 4.2) opened the door for his supporters to follow suit and insult junior scholars. In turn, signatories received a flood of threats of physical violence and other attacks including (1)–(2) and others documented in the Online Appendix. We take this behavior to be contradictory to what is expected from a prominent scholar, LSA Fellow, and Media Expert.

5.3. DISCUSSION IN THE MEDIA. Next, we ask why media outlets presented a view which we take to be decidedly one-sided. Recall that many news outlets (including influential ones such as *The New York Times*, *BBC*, *The Telegraph*, and *Die Welt*) presented mainly or solely Pinker’s account, including the false claims debunked above. *The New York Times* and *La Tercera* refused to issue corrections despite requests, doubling down on their editorial stance, while *Die Welt* has not

responded. Linguist Carrie Gillon spoke with Powell for his *New York Times* piece (Powell 2020), providing comments supportive of TOL and aiming to correct his factual errors (Gillon & Figueroa 2020), but none were included in the article. Instead, Powell (2020) claimed that “[m]any of the linguists proved shy about talking” after two other linguists declined to comment. All attempts to publish op-eds supportive of TOL or simply to correct the record were turned down.

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 were able to control the conversation early on, while the LSA’s response was slow and equivocal; the LSA never explicitly countered the specific false claims made on behalf of the organization and its then President (see Section 3.1), allowing journalists to treat these claims as uncontested. And third, the anti-TOL narrative might fit the political agenda of at least some media outlets.

As a rule, the press is reliant on catchy headlines and black-and-white narratives to generate interest and funds. A PR firm might recognize that propping up a “cancel culture” bogeyman benefits all parties: journalists can feel they are defending the ideal of free speech, their editors gain a controversial topic which will generate clicks and therefore revenue (cf. the letter published in *Harper’s Magazine* 2020), 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. See Borer 2020b for similar conclusions.

It could be, of course, that each and every journalist carefully evaluated the arguments in TOL, rejected them, and further decided not to even report on them (as suggested by an anonymous reviewer). We find such an explanation overly charitable. We know of few attempts to interview TOL signatories and even fewer attempts to understand why several hundred scholars would choose to sign a letter composed entirely of “unconvincing” arguments. Instead, we find journalists using their platforms, however inadvertently, to create a dominant narrative wherein the arguments in TOL are so bad that not even its signatories find them convincing. See Green 2020 for a thorough refutation of such a claim. We reiterate, though, that we can only speculate about the reasoning

behind the decisions of these journalists and editors.

5.4. DISCUSSION AMONG LINGUISTS. We are now in a position to evaluate the reception in the field. Within linguistics, we identify two populations relevant to our argument: one which claimed that TOL raised important issues the field should address, and one which didn't. Broadly speaking, this is also the division between those who took TOL to be part of a much broader pattern and those that took the tweets documented in TOL to be the beginning and end of what anyone had to criticize about Pinker. The former consists to some extent of junior linguists and the latter of senior linguists. Given this power differential among the groups, the former camp has felt like its views were left unheard, as documented throughout.

Of particular note are two contributions. The first is a blog post written by Barbara H. Partee on July 6, 2020 (Partee 2020). This post evaluates the arguments in TOL, concluding that all arguments can be dismissed or attributed to a misunderstanding, rendering the requests in TOL unwarranted. Regardless of Partee's intentions, her post was taken by many as an evaluation of the totality of claims levied against Pinker and, thus, a justification to end the conversation. We suspect that Partee's prominent status lent her post more weight than that of other linguists who published posts about TOL around the same time, taking the view that there is more to the case against Pinker than the six examples mentioned in TOL (see Adger 2020, Esipova 2020, Green 2020, Rett 2020a, Snider 2020, and Stalley 2020).

While popular media served as platforms to promulgate a one-sided narrative to the general audience, Partee's reputation played a similar role within the field. Readers who took Partee 2020 to be the authoritative response to TOL, especially those less commonly on social media and those less willing to engage with analyses by more junior scholars, were left unaware of crucial background discussed in the other pieces mentioned above.

Another related event is a Facebook post by Pauline Jacobson, David Pesetsky and Partee (Pesetsky 2020), appearing on July 7, 2020, and envisioned as a statement condemning abusive behavior toward TOL signatories that would appeal to a broad audience regardless of stance toward the content of TOL (post authors, p.c.).¹² The post invited signatures from readers who “disagreed

¹²When initially posted, the post was limited to “friends of friends.” Its settings have since been

for various reasons with the open letter . . . and therefore did not sign it,” but nonetheless wished to express their “strongest possible disapproval” of the “torrent of on-line abuse and contempt launched at the writers and signers of the letter.” The post notes that “many of the signers are also early-career linguists,” stating that signing “constitutes an act of bravery,” since these junior scholars have “everything to lose.” As of this writing, this post has 179 signatures, in addition to the three authors.

What is again important here is less the intentions behind the post or its specific language and more how it was received. Despite the authors’ intentions, this post was taken by some to be a response to TOL — an anonymous reviewer even called it “effectively a counter-petition” — one that does not engage with the content of TOL but rather asks to restore the peace. Importantly, the post calls for calm and good-will, but does not address the sources of discord and does not call for concrete action. The result was viewed by many junior scholars as an empty gesture. As Hadas Kotek (quoted in Borer 2020a) puts it, “keeping the status quo is not a neutral position; it’s a political position that maintains the power in the hands of those who have it, namely the senior people. It is therefore in effect a position that supports Pinker.”

As a result of these reactions from respected senior linguists, combined with the limited response from the LSA and the media attention TOL garnered, we conclude that the field and its institutions have thus far failed to hear and represent the views of many members, most of whom are junior. As Ramchand 2020 puts it, “The Pinker battle is precisely about who gets to speak for us (as an academic discipline) in the mainstream media.”

6. CONCLUSION. We have highlighted a number of factors leading to how the open letter to the LSA was received and how the voices of predominantly junior linguists were left unheard; space precludes us from tackling these issues in more depth here, but in any case the current contribution should be seen as part of the conversation, not a summary of concluded events.

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

changed to “public.” We include quotes from the post with the authors’ permission.

boundaries.

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, for example racism and sexism, where the stakes are much higher. Accordingly, we conclude this commentary by acknowledging that all named authors of the present article benefit from whiteness. In the spirit of the Statement on Race quoted in our Introduction, we wish to acknowledge our privilege in having been able to engage in meaningful conversations with other linguists surrounding TOL, and in having the resources to invest in writing this article. We recognize that BIPOC voices have a harder time being heard. When we ask “Who speaks for *us*,” we hope to include all linguists in the conversation and to appreciate all voices.

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

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS. The documentation of tweets can be found at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PIjlZQ2Ag7Cpv3N-M-10L4n-sQ8Qwuphh-i3C4mLgQA/edit?usp=sharing>

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