



## **Linguistics in peril: An open letter**

I write in my capacity as Chair of the University Council for General and Applied Linguistics (UCGAL), an umbrella group whose members (see below) are the professional associations for a wide range of Language and Linguistics academic specialisms.

As those entrusted with the stewardship and development of the discipline of Linguistics in the UK, we are dismayed to hear of yet another short-sighted plan to close courses and make staff in Linguistics and English Language redundant, this time at the University of Kent. In my four years in this role, I have had occasion to write to the Vice Chancellors of a number of universities (including Chester, Huddersfield, Leicester, Roehampton) where similar actions were being taken or threatened, and have heard of more where colleagues in English Literature, Modern Languages and other Humanities and Arts subjects were under threat. This list looks set to grow (e.g. at Northumbria University) as the unsustainable financial model under which universities struggle continues to push the managers of these institutions into decisions that are based not on what a university should be, but on the bottom line.

Like many others, we believe that Universities have become shackled to the fee-income framework that ill-suits the provision of education, and the result is a brutal form of market-driven planning which is detrimental to the quality and range of education opportunities for the coming generations. Whilst a combination of demographic change and social and political pressures may have depressed the take up of Linguistics, Languages and other Humanities degrees recently, this is not the time to follow market forces down an ever-more vocational (or “STEM”) pathway. If our politicians and Universities don’t take a lead in protecting the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, they will increasingly be seen as a luxury only the affluent can afford with the result that opportunities for less privileged students and researchers will evaporate. The consequences for society more generally of failing to produce large numbers of graduates with the critical thinking skills provided by an education in these fields will be severe. Whilst some disciplines (such as English and History) will continue to thrive at high-status institutions, there are others which are small, under-appreciated and yet punch well above their weight. This includes some traditional disciplines, such as Classics and Philosophy, but also some more modern disciplines, such as Sociology and Linguistics, the discipline my organisation represents. Other neighbouring disciplines, such as Modern Languages, are also under extreme pressure, not least because of the vicious circle whereby there are not enough dedicated teachers in schools to inspire and encourage those inclined to take up higher level study in these fields. Many of our members are to be found in these threatened departments.

Amongst all of these, Linguistics is particularly vulnerable, not least because there is a gap in understanding in the public realm, meaning that it is seen as niche or obscure, even by those leading

our university sector. We take seriously this dearth of public understanding and are keen to make known what will be lost if this small but vital field is allowed to contract any further. Whilst we believe that there is an urgent need to review how universities are funded nationally, we are also convinced that with better understanding of how this subject can – and does – link to other innovative and exciting disciplines, a sustainable role for the field could be planned into any modern forward-looking university. This requires vision and imagination at the top, but we believe that those very staff whose careers are being threatened are best-placed to help the managers see beyond the bottom line and create new opportunities which will be attractive to students.

Linguistics, though often grouped for practical purposes with English and other Humanities, is in fact an example of a cross-over discipline par excellence. At one extreme, it is a science whereby its sub-field of phonetics uses technology and experimentation to ascertain speech mechanisms and patterns with applications in forensics, speech therapy and language teaching. At the other end, the sub-fields of stylistics and discourse analysis mean that it comes close to English Literature and other humanities, where the study of meaning in texts is examined with regard to their full context and individual effect on readers. In-between, there are countless sub-fields (from grammatical theory to sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics) which provide insights into the means and outcomes of human communication in all its forms, and contribute to much broader debates about what it is to be human (one need only look at the recent debate concerning the nature of Large Language Models and Generative AI). Indeed, many linguists work in departments labelled with a different discipline's title (Psychology, Sociology, English etc.) The consequence of this distributed nature is that the discipline as a whole is often relatively invisible, except where linguists are gathered into a team or department with 'Linguistics' in the title. Either way, the ubiquity of linguists throughout academia – and their vital role in applications as wide ranging as Forensics, Law, and Machine Learning to language learning and language creation (e.g. in Harry Potter, Game of Thrones, and Superman) is a sign of its relevance in today's society, a qualification that should give pause to any university planning to cut provision in this field.

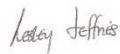
We would therefore counsel a different approach to the perceived problems of under-recruitment in our field and suggest that with the right support and promotion, it will not be long before Linguistics (and indeed Modern Languages including English) are recruiting well again, making the suffering of those losing their jobs, whether through voluntary or compulsory redundancy entirely unnecessary. Although students' own preferences and appetites clearly need to be taken into account in course planning, there is surely a role for both government and HEIs to educate and encourage those who are naturally drawn to Language and Linguistics (or History or other Humanities subjects) ensuring that they know that employment is high amongst graduates in these fields and that following their interests will not put their future in jeopardy. There is currently the opposite pressure – against studying Linguistics (and other subjects in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences more generally) which university leaders and government departments could do much to mitigate with a little support.

Linguistics and language study has so much to offer students in providing a route to critical thinking and rigorous analysis via reflecting on human language and communication. There are many careers in which these skills are valued and the final destinations of graduates in Linguistics and Languages is as diverse as any other graduates. Instead of disposing of highly trained experts in these fields without a backward glance, surely University leaders have the vision and imagination to develop new and financially sustainable plans alongside these colleagues? Too often, we hear of teams of staff working under great pressure to revise and fit their courses to a top-down idea of what is needed, only to be told they have failed to turn things around in unrealistically short time-frames

and that their courses are to be closed with redundancies to follow. It is also worth looking to the centrally-provided 'services' of Universities, such as marketing and recruitment, to be more flexible and supportive of initiatives coming from the departments themselves, rather than using one-size models to fit all subjects on the grounds of economies of scale.

I am proud to say that Linguistics is first and foremost a collegiate discipline in which peers work together to promote understanding of human language despite the competitive market in which we are obliged to work. We and our member organisations would be happy to work with government, with University leaders and with colleagues at Kent and beyond to explore the potential for change, without narrowing the opportunities for students and without loss of jobs.

Yours sincerely,



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On behalf of the following membership organisations and their members:

Association for French Language Studies <https://afls.net/>  
British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) [www.baal.org.uk/](http://www.baal.org.uk/)  
British Association of Academic Phoneticians [www.baap.ac.uk/](http://www.baap.ac.uk/)  
British Association for Clinical Linguists [www.bacl.info/](http://www.bacl.info/)  
Forum for Germanic Language Studies  
Henry Sweet Society [www.henrysweet.org/](http://www.henrysweet.org/)  
Linguistics Association of Great Britain (LAGB) [www.lagb.org.uk/](http://www.lagb.org.uk/)  
Philological Society [www.philsoc.org.uk/](http://www.philsoc.org.uk/)  
Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA) [www.pala.ac.uk/](http://www.pala.ac.uk/)  
UK Cognitive Linguistics Association [www.uk-cla.org.uk/](http://www.uk-cla.org.uk/)  
University Council of Modern Languages [www.ucml.ac.uk/](http://www.ucml.ac.uk/)