



## Real Talk: Working at the Border of Sister Disciplines

*Society for Linguistic Anthropology*

Anna Babel (Ohio State U)

One of this column's areas of focus for the upcoming year is interdisciplinarity in linguistic anthropology. We're excited to have contributions lined up from colleagues who are crossing disciplinary borders and collaborating with scholars in geography, agriculture, education, medicine and more. If you are an interdisciplinary scholar, please check out the [SLA Interdisciplinary Engagement Conference Fund](#), which supports participation in conferences beyond the usual linganth venues.

I thought we might kick this series off with a practical discussion of the most common, and most fundamental, disciplinary alignment in our field—the convergence and dialogue between linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics.

*Why sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology?*

Sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology are two sides of the same coin. While sociolinguists are interested in how cultural and social structures shed light on how we process and produce language, linguistic anthropologists are interested in the converse—how language performs, instantiates, and is integrated into social and cultural categories. The closer one looks at either side of the coin, the clearer it becomes that they're actually part of one and the same entity.

### ***Interdisciplinary work can be both rewarding and frustrating.***

Sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology have been closely connected since their common origins in the work of scholars like Goffman, Gumperz, Hymes, and Labov in the 1960s and 1970s ([Duranti 2001](#)). More recently, it's been suggested that the area of convergence between these fields should be referred to as "sociocultural linguistics," a broader label that would include both culturally- and linguistically-oriented work. ([Bucholtz & Hall 2008](#)).

*What does "interdisciplinary" mean in this context, anyway?*

It continues to be the case that most PhD programs are either in linguistics or in anthropology, with a small number of programs that offer both or a combined degree. That said, virtually all linguistic anthropology degrees require some training in sociolinguistics, although the converse is not always true. Likewise, because the jobs that sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists are best prepared for are often in either linguistics or anthropology departments—but seldom in both—younger scholars are forced to specialize. Being hired in a particular discipline can influence the kind of work that scholars are encouraged to produce, as [Steve Black noted in a recent column](#). Others, like me, end up in language departments or in area studies programs, where there are different kinds of constraints on the type of work one is expected to do.

Despite their similarities, the two fields share some—perhaps many—methodological and theoretical divides. Perhaps the most striking is the tendency towards quantitative methods and scientist attitudes in many traditions of sociolinguistics, in contrast to a general orientation towards cultural anthropology and social theory in linguistic anthropology. This division is exacerbated by generally negative attitudes and, to be honest, a lot of insecurity on both sides.

*How does interdisciplinarity help to move the field ahead?*

There are two ways that interdisciplinary work moves the field ahead. First, we have a responsibility to speak out about the way that we see language not only to those in our community who already agree with us, but also to scholars working in related disciplines or subdisciplines who might get something out of social insights to problems that they are working on. For example, I've published on the role that social factors play in evidentiality ([2009](#)), language contact ([2011](#)), genetic classification of languages ([2013](#)), Spanish morphosyntax ([2014](#)) and other topics. I like writing these types of articles because they force me to read widely, to take on someone else's viewpoint, and to learn new literature that I wouldn't otherwise have read.

Secondly, we need to read work that can speak to our own discipline from outside. I've been very excited about recent work in sociophonetics and exemplar models that theorize cognitive structures behind the relationship between language features and social categorization ([Hay & Drager 2007](#)). There is also much work to be done with the relationship of social theory to scholarship in the field(s) of 'cognitive sociolinguistics' ([Kristiansen & Dirven 2008](#)) and/or 'social cognitive linguistics,' ([Croft 2009](#)) a body of work that draws primarily on corpus linguistics, and hence is most at ease with variationist sociolinguistic methods.

*What's it like to be an interdisciplinary scholar?*

It can be both rewarding and frustrating. Practically speaking, it can be more difficult for interdisciplinary scholars to publish. An unsympathetic reviewer can wreck the

chances of your manuscript's success. Even once you've been published, it's harder to get cited when your work falls even slightly outside the mainstream direction of the field. At the same time, it can be difficult to fulfill commitments to many disciplines at once. It doubles or even triples the number of conferences you feel you should attend, the number of articles you think you should be reading, the number of service roles you consider taking on, even the number of meetings or colloquia you want to attend on campus.

Intellectually speaking, it is incredibly rewarding to have access to people who speak from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and who challenge me to rethink my own work. There is excellent work going on at the borders of anthropology and linguistics all the time, and because most of us have at least some training in both disciplines, it is easy to find people who are interested in engaging with your work. An interdisciplinary stance can widen the possible audiences for our academic work, and at best it can draw groups of people who wouldn't otherwise have read each other's work into dialogue with each other.

*Should younger scholars develop an interdisciplinary orientation in their work?*

Yes and no. As a relatively recent Ph.D., I have seen interdisciplinary colleagues who have struggled to find jobs in part because they didn't fit neatly into the categories that people wrote job descriptions for. Plenty of people will say, "We need a sociolinguist," but not a lot will say, "We need a sociolinguist who is also a geographer or a medical anthropologist." Those are very specialized types of skills, and while you may be lucky to find the perfect job out there looking for you, it's more likely that you'll need to figure out how to convince someone that you're the perfect candidate for their job. I think it's important that if you want to position yourself as a scholar in more than one fields, that you have work that will speak to the core interests of each of the fields that you address. That is to say, don't invest all your time in crossing, at least not until you have some job security.

**Anna Babel** is an assistant professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Ohio State U, and a contributing co-editor of this column.

Please note the following **SLA Business News** items:

[Call for Proposals: SLA Interdisciplinary Public Engagement Conference Fund](#) (Deadline: October 1, 2016 for 2017 conferences)

[SLA Graduate Student Paper contest for 2016](#) (Deadline, March, 11, 2016)

Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA Contributing Editors **Aaron Ansell** ([aansell@vt.edu](mailto:aansell@vt.edu)) or **Anna Babel** ([babel.6@osu.edu](mailto:babel.6@osu.edu)).

[Previous Article](#)

[Back to Top](#)

[Next Article](#)

[Related Categories](#) +

[Related Tags](#) +

## Comments

**LM Proctor** says:

February 12, 2016 at 3:08 pm

Thank you for this very useful and thoughtful piece. I'd quibble slightly with your comments on the usefulness of being interdisciplinary—it depends on the kind of institution. At smaller universities and colleges (like SLACs), being able to cross disciplinary boundaries is a valuable trait. And if they have linguistics programs, but no department, then a sociolinguist may need a home department, and they may very well look for someone "who is also a geographer or a medical anthropologist." That being said, your advice is still good. How do you think it would be different for scholars who wish to look for jobs outside academia?

[Reply](#)

[Commenting Disclaimer](#) +