



SUSTAINABLE LINGUISTICS: A WORKING PROPOSAL

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1. STATEMENT

It is now scientifically established that the current state of the earth, and its evolution, represent a threat to human lives, and ultimately to the human race. Climate change scholars link this climate emergency to ‘excessive consumption of the wealthy lifestyle’ (Ripple, Wolf, Newsome, Barnard & Moomaw, 2019), and call for radical change towards sustainability.¹ Academia is relatively privileged, and its carbon footprint is high due to, in particular, frequent long-distance travel. In this document, we consider how to favour sustainability in academic activities in and around the Discipline of Linguistics, although our proposed action plan may be extended to other Disciplines and domains.

2. PHILOSOPHY

We recognize that in contemporary Western societies, unsustainable practices constitute and define people’s lives. Therefore, full sustainability can only be a long-term objective.

We also acknowledge that the way and extent to which each individual is able to implement change towards sustainability is largely determined by:

- Their needs, which result from unique life circumstances, including professional and personal duties and commitments, usually reflecting personal history, background, health, etc.
- Their practical means, including financial situation, professional status, cultural capital, etc.

With this in mind, we will present a number of action guidelines that our Linguistics Discipline at the University of Western Australia (Perth, WA) has collectively adopted. As historians Sleight & Green (2019) suggest, we propose this working document not as a judgement on our current practice (which grew out of a set of unique socio-historical factors in academia and beyond) or to dictate best practice on an academic’s personal life choices.² Since every situation is different, we encourage other Institutions and Departments in Australia and elsewhere to consider comparable plans, in line with their own situations and capacities. The action guidelines below are offered in the spirit of collegiality and to encourage open conversations. We also wish to share this document as widely as possible to expand the discussion to Linguistics outside Australia, Disciplines outside Linguistics and to the Academy more generally.

3. PRINCIPLES

Academia is a global network and, as a result, one of the main unsustainable aspects of our activities concerns global travel and its carbon footprint. To improve sustainability while maintaining our vibrant community, we have identified three main avenues:

1. Dematerialize interactions.
2. Optimize the network benefits of (rarer) in-the-flesh interactions.
3. Nurture local networks.

¹ Ripple, William J., Christopher Wolf, Thomas M. Newsome, Phoebe Barnard & William R. Moomaw (2019). World scientists’ warning of a climate emergency. *BioScience*.

² Sleight, Simon & Toby Green (2019). Historians and sustainability: A working paper. *The Blog of the Royal Historical Society*. <https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/2019/10/31/historians-and-sustainability/>.

In terms of environmental benefit, our program seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as related to, primarily, carbon dioxide emissions. Additional guidelines also address the problem of global tree-cover loss and meat production, plastic use and contamination of our waterways.

4. SUGGESTED ACTION GUIDELINES

Departmental seminars

Perth and WA are geographically vast but demographically modest. This presents a challenge when it comes to fostering academic exchange and creating an academic community. While exacerbated in WA, we believe these challenges also apply in many other Australian cities.

Video conferencing

Starting in 2020, seminar presentations will be invited from colleagues who live out of town, using dedicated audio-visual equipment in university conference rooms, where the set up allows for fluid interactions between the remote presenter and the audience.

We will begin with one remote presentation per semester, increasing the frequency of remote seminars once the practice becomes established. Based on this experience, we will make recommendations to the University in order to improve the technology and its set up as necessary.

Nurturing local networks

To reduce carbon emissions, we customarily invite as many local researchers to our seminar series as is practicable. A focus on regional scholars opens up possibilities for researchers and language activists with diverse backgrounds to share their work in a supportive environment. This provides the sense of community needed for any human network to thrive. This local network can then facilitate connections with larger national and international networks by virtue of transitivity. Each connection of a single member of the local network with another part of the larger network (whether virtual or in person) creates a ripple connection-effect in the rest of the local network. As a result, the size and strength of bonds in the local network amplify the sense of connection with very little travel, and therefore minimal carbon footprint.

In-the-flesh visitors

Given Western Australia's geographical remoteness, it is important for us to occasionally invite colleagues to visit in person. We are currently reflecting on how to make such visits meaningful and worthwhile both for us and our visitors, by convening bundles of events that our guests can take part in. These events will combine interactions with University staff, students, alumni and other 'friends of Linguistics', broad audience and others, so as to maximize the benefits and network ripple-effect of each visit.

Conferences

Biennial conference model

Attending conferences in person significantly contributes to our carbon footprint in the Academy. Co-author of this working proposal and Vice-President of the Australian Linguistic Society (2018-2020), Celeste Rodríguez Louro has proposed that the Australian Linguistic Society consider moving to a biennial model. Some colleagues within the ALS Executive expressed concerns that this decision might pre-empt Honours and Master's students from presenting their research to colleagues and it was suggested that the Australian Linguistic Society might work with the New Zealand Linguistic Society (NZLS) to host their respective conferences in alternative years. The proposal to work alongside the NZLS, backed by the ALS Executive, will be discussed at the NZLS's AGM in late November 2019. In addition to reducing carbon emissions, a

biennial conference will also contribute to making conference organisation more sustainable by reducing pressure to run such a time-consuming event every year.

Australian Linguistic Society meeting at UWA

Independently of the adoption of a biennial conference model, we at UWA Linguistics are exploring alternative modes of participation to national and international events, including the next Conference of the Australian Linguistic Society in Perth, WA (2022 or 2023).

Apart from reducing travel and its resulting carbon footprint, the proposed solutions below have the advantage of enabling a greater range of delegates with diverse backgrounds to participate. This includes those with restricted financial means, or with lesser flexibility to travel.

Remote participation

Themed sessions and workshops with external convenors will welcome remote contributions and attendance. As far as possible, sessions with remote participants will be allocated to video-conference rooms so that remote participation remains comfortable.

Livestreaming

One of the parallel sessions will be livestreamed. Whether remote attendance should be free or incur a fee is open to discussion (and subject to technical feasibility). The livestreamed session could host the presentations ranked highest in the review process, or those deemed by the ALS executive and local conference organisers to align best with the theme that year. Suggestions are welcome.

Remote attendance

We are contemplating a ‘remote attendance’ registration option, in a ‘remora’ fashion where remote delegates would be supported by a delegate attending in-person. The physically present delegate would be authorized to help their remote companion attend any of the sessions they wish to attend via Zoom or other remote platform. Room set up and other aspects of practical organization would be arranged that facilitate this mode of remote attendance.

Another option would be to call for expressions of interest to attend some sessions remotely and for the session chair to organise remote Zoom attendance (by sending interested parties a Zoom link, checking connectivity, etc.) before the commencement of the session. The conference organisers would need to provide the necessary IT support and a suggested extra 10 minutes or so for the Chair to organise the remote connection might be advisable. These options are yet to be technically explored. Suggestions welcome!

Other aspects of conference organization

Conference catering will be fully vegan by default, with non-vegan options requested separately – rather than the other way around. We will use compostable napkins, plates, cutlery as well as a food waste management systems that convert food scraps placed in a designated bin into soil fertiliser.³

We also support eliminating unnecessary merchandising and instead investing in reusable coffee mugs or seedlings.

³ For this service we have recently used Baaki with great success in one of our outreach events, <https://baaki.com.au>

University lobbying

Apart from the above practical steps, we are also lobbying for our institution to adopt the following principles, which may be extended to other national and international institutions.

- Encourage the University to invest in equipment that allows for seamless remote interactions.
- Normalise PhD vivas and other HDR examinations by Zoom or similar remote platforms.
- Stop encouraging staff to travel and/or invite visitors as often as they can.
- Lift incentives and implicit evaluation imperatives to attend conferences, travel abroad, etc.
- Encourage members of international bodies (boards, committees, councils) to attend such meetings virtually.
- Explicitly encourage, reward and facilitate remote attendance and the organization of remotely accessible events for all staff.
- Make it mandatory for all travel to include carbon offset programs. Favour offset programs that support indigenous employment on country (such as the various ranger groups in Arnhem Land).
- Encourage train travel where possible by providing further funds for those who can travel by train.
- Discourage the production of unnecessary merchandising, brochure printing, etc.
- Encourage and support environmentally friendly catering at University functions, including seminars, conferences, graduations and other events.
- Encourage academic and professional staff to continue to call for their institutions to divest from fossil fuels. Harnessing the investment power of institutions can send a clear signal to polluting industries.
- Plant institutional forests to offset travel by University staff and students.

5. A FINAL NOTE

This is a working document. We believe in joining forces to advance our discipline while caring for ourselves, our communities and the planet. Your feedback and that of your colleagues who may not otherwise have access to the internet, or this document, is welcome.

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