



Department of
Linguistics and Modern Languages
語言學及現代語言系

“Just” Language: Law, meet Linguistics

Linguistics Seminars

Professor Janet RANDALL

Northeastern University

Date: August 30, 2018 (Thursday)

Time: 10:00am - 11:30am

Venue: Room 220 of Fung King Hey Building,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong



Abstract

You are a member of a jury. After the trial, the judge reads you and your fellow jurors a set of instructions. One of them begins: *Failure of recollection is common. Innocent misrecollection is not uncommon...* Confused? Now imagine that your native language is not English or that you never finished high school. Or both. Imagine that the judge has already been reading you instructions for over an hour. Justice systems depend on jurors making informed decisions to reach a verdict, so when jury instructions are too challenging, jurors not only disengage but return misinformed verdicts. Courtroom practices can make jurors' jobs even harder. Many states don't provide copies of the instructions for jurors to read along and some don't permit jurors to take notes. Can we make instructions easier for jurors, and in so doing, improve justice? In a series of studies, we show that jury instruction comprehension significantly improves (a) when subjects can read the texts of the instructions while listening to them and (b) when the instructions are rewritten in Plain English, minimizing two challenging linguistic factors: passive verbs and unfamiliar legal expressions, or “legalese.” Improvements were even greater for MTurk subjects than undergraduates and when the methodology was changed to more closely mirror courtroom procedure. Taken together, our studies provide strong evidence that current jury instructions need to be rewritten. And they lay the groundwork for reform, providing judiciaries with the evidence they need to implement change.

Speaker

Professor Janet Randall's research spans linguistic theory, language acquisition, psycholinguistics, and most recently, linguistics and law. Her theoretical work focuses on the syntax/semantics interface, specifically issues of argument structure. She has investigated the argument structure change that happens when verbs become nouns (they *danced the tango incessantly*, *the dancing/*dancers of the tango incessantly*); the argument structure of resultative verbs -- *The joggers ran their Nikes threadbare* (Carrier & Randall 1992, *Linguistic Inquiry*); and argument linking – how a verb's conceptual structure arguments project to the syntax (Randall 2010, *Linking: the geometry of argument structure*, Springer). Her language acquisition work has also explored argument structure: How do learners distinguish the different categories of intransitive verb arguments, which differ in subtle ways from language to language? Her research at the Max Planck Institute on unaccusatives in Dutch and German led to proposals about semantic primitives in the innate blueprint for verbs and the acquisition path from initial state to target grammar. Her newest research project, the Linguistics & Law Lab, revisits her psycholinguistic beginnings (Frazier, Clifton & Randall 1983, *Cognition*), to address the Linguistic Society of America's call for linguists to “engage the public in learning about linguistics and its broader value to society.” Collaborating with legal professionals, her project examines the many ways that legal language can be unjust and how linguistic research can open the door to productive legal reforms. See the lab's current projects at: <https://web.northeastern.edu/lingandlaw/>.

ALL ARE WELCOME

Enquiries

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