

1989

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In his last 'TOPIC...COMMENT' column in the November issue of *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* (1989), Geoff Pullum related the following anecdote and commented on it:

Peter Salus once, long ago, briefly had sight of a most interesting document [...]. The document was a hotel management guide to convention crowds and their special needs and characteristics. He saw it when he was a local organizer for some meeting. [...] And the entry under linguistics conferences had simply this to say about linguists:

*Eat and drink at all hours of day and night. Breakages few. Bring their own women.*

[...] The bit about bringing our own women, of course, indicates a certain unconscious sexism in hotel managers, but even more so, it is a comment on the male-dominated character of most professions and most academic disciplines [...]. Linguists don't 'bring their own women', those women are linguists! [...] One of the many things I find pleasing about the linguistics profession is that it shows so much less gender bias in its demography than do most sectors of academia. (Pullum 1989: 607)

Of course, gender bias is relative and gradient, and to some extent also lies in the eye of the beholder. How many women make a panel of a certain size balanced? Pullum in his piece goes on to laud the 1989 meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics for having 30% female registrants and speakers, and 45% female programme committee members. How is gender

balance measured? In first authorships, citations, book titles, tenured academic positions, full professorships? What was the state of gender balance or bias in linguistics in 1989, and what is it now, more than 30 years on? Has there been a change?

It is of course impossible to speak for the whole field of linguistics in a text as short as this; different subfields, even different theoretical currents within subfields seem to have very different cultures in this respect. Child language acquisition, for instance, is still much more female-dominated than for instance formal syntax or semantics. I will therefore look only at a small part of my own little corner of the field. The international conference of Diachronic Generative Linguistics, DiGS, was first organized in York in 1990, a few months after Pullum's musings. Looking at a core conference in a field can provide a good measure of developments regarding gender equality. Conferences are indispensable for networking, affording researchers, particularly junior ones, visibility in the field, which in turn is an important factor in hiring for, and promotion to, more senior positions.

The linguists at DiGS have always brought their own women, but in different roles. The programme of the first DiGS is no longer available, only a list of participants, audience and speakers included. The fact that this list names 37 women vs. 25 men (=60%) says something about the composition of the field, but little about the distribution of speakers vs. audience, and hence the representation of women on the podium, as a look at the subsequent programmes reveals. The programme of the second DiGS (1992) has been preserved, and it only has seven female speakers (some as second author to a male first author) and two female discussants, vs. 10 male speakers and 11 male discussants, viz. 25%. The female/male ratio of speakers vs. discussants at the third DiGS (1994) was 10 to 15, already 40%. From 1995 onwards, it is instructive to look at the gender ratio among the keynote speakers (of both the main conference and the satellite workshops): the following graph, aggregating four to five editions of DiGS (the conference has only been annual since 2008), shows on the one hand that by Pullum's (1989) standards, DiGS has always been relatively gender-balanced, but on the other that it has still improved over the 25 years (and 19 DiGSes) that followed, with the gender ratio in the keynote speakers fluctuating around roughly 40:60 until ca. 2010, and in the period 2016-2021 approaching the approximate ratio of researchers in the field (60:40, if we go by the list of participants of the first DiGS).



Gender ratio in the keynote speakers at DiGS in 1995-2021.

It is also instructive to look at *who* the invited speakers are. Of those 15 linguists who were invited more than once, only five are women. One of them, Susan Pintzuk, was invited four times, but there are three men who were invited even more often, one of them even nine times. Although all of those men are of course excellent representatives of our field, one may submit that visibility for women has still not reached its full potential at DiGS, and a certain gender bias has persisted. Many of the female participants of the first DiGS in 1990 were only invited as keynote speakers for the first time 15 years after the first conference, when several of the male participants had been invited several times already.

Things may be worse in other fields, as already remarked by Pullum, but are we to contend ourselves with this thought? Men get their first invitation as keynote speakers when they are younger (this has also been a tendency at DiGS), get their first permanent job earlier, are promoted to full professor earlier. It is hard to measure what influence visibility at just one conference has, and thankfully, there have been female role models and trailblazers in my field from early on. But only in the last few years do we see a rapprochement between the ratio among speakers on the programme and invited speakers, and more early-career (and) female keynotes. More importantly, we see a clear trend towards a fair representation of the composition of the field (by our earlier estimate 60% female) in the gender ratio among keynote speakers.

Applying the principles of my field – making predictions based on available data – I take this to spell an increasingly younger, more female, and more gender-representative future for DiGS.



Pullum, G.K. 1989. "Topic...Comment: The Final Curtain". *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 7,4: 605-611.

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