2017

Exploring Authority in Linguistics Research: Who to Trust When Everyone’s a Language Expert

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jonathan-howell/6/
CHAPTER 3*

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Many instruction librarians use the CRAAP test or a similar pneumonic tool as a regular activity in information literacy instruction classes. This involves having the students in the class select one or more sources and instructing them to answer a series of questions about these sources, as prompted by a simple checklist. Is the selected source Current, Relevant, Authoritative, Accurate and What is its Purpose? The goal is to help the students ascertain whether or not they should select this source and use it for an assignment. On occasion, a student will raise a hand and ask a simple question: “What do you mean by authoritative?” This is the central question we will deal with in this chapter.

Our disciplinary context is the field of linguistics. As in other disciplines, the local information landscape exhibits particular nuances and idiosyncrasies which allow exploration of information literacy more globally. The cost of entry into the local information landscape, for students and librarians alike, is particularly high in linguistics because, as we will elaborate, the discipline is not widely known and, for various reasons, scholars of linguistics have a fragmented distribution.

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For a librarian and a linguist, threshold concepts provided us the common language to engage in productive, sustained discussion, between each other and in the classroom. We therefore adopt the language of threshold concepts in this chapter, recognizing, however, that the validity of threshold concepts is a matter of continued debate in librarianship.

In addition to exploring the local information landscape, we also examine parallels between a discipline-specific threshold concept, Linguistic Authority is Constructed and Contextual, and the information literacy threshold concept Authority is Constructed and Contextual.

In the following section, we introduce our understanding of the information literacy threshold concept Authority is Constructed and Contextual. Next, we compare features of the discipline-specific threshold concept Linguistic Authority is Constructed and Contextual with the information literacy threshold concept Authority is Constructed and Contextual. In the remaining sections, we provide a case study from an introductory course on phonetics and phonology, with exercises that were intended, first, to confront students with troublesome knowledge, second, to lead them through the liminal space and, third, to help them understand their own role as emerging experts. We conclude with a reflection about the nature of collaboration between librarian and faculty member and the promise that teaching for transfer holds for advancing information literacy.

What is authority?
Before librarians began working with threshold concepts, largely through the introduction of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (Framework), a typical discussion of authority would have included the following topics, some or all of which would likely be touched upon during a typical library instruction session:

- Reviewing the concept of peer-review
- Comparing popular and scholarly literature
- Considering the match between an information need and respective level of authority sought
- Recognizing information may contain bias/prejudice and may be affected by cultural, political, or other contexts

Students would likely leave such a session understanding that they should prefer information created in the academic culture (e.g., published in a peer-reviewed journal) and develop a critical stance to information created in other spheres (e.g., popular media.) Given the time pressures of the one-shot model, a librarian would spend more time on the first two points as listed above and less time on the latter two. However, a deeper, more nuanced
discussion of authority would not have taken place, as the need to demonstrate library databases, the library catalog, and citation styles and mechanics would fill the remainder of the instruction time.

The scenario described above, particularly under the time pressures noted, promotes dualistic thinking. There simply is no threshold for students to cross. They do not encounter any troublesome knowledge, but likely accept as fact that some information sources are inherently better than others. Learning which ones to trust is accomplished by relying on a checklist of indicators of authority, such as whether a source is published in a peer-reviewed journal or written by a university professor. As long as students cite peer-reviewed sources in their assignment or paper, some degree of success in learning about authority is deemed to have taken place.

In contrast, we approached the concept of authority, not as a set of skills to be learned during a visit to the library, but as a semester-long discussion. This began by introducing troublesome knowledge early on in the semester through activities discussed below. After the introduction of troublesome knowledge (i.e., that there was no easy way to determine authority of an information source through simple indicators of quality), the authors had to be comfortable allowing the students to be uncomfortable as they grappled with the new knowledge. For the librarian, who is used to wrapping up a one-shot instruction session with a tidy assessment and some indication of successful learning, this was particularly challenging.

Moreover, through the semester-long discussion, we needed to guide students to an understanding of how and why authority is complex—namely, that Authority is Constructed and Contextual in at least the following ways:

- Authority is partially constructed through reputation, such as author affiliation and publication record, publication venue/distribution channel (e.g., well-known journal, academic blog, television news report), and demonstrated impact (e.g., citation counts).
- Authority is partially constructed through credentials.
- Authority is relative to a community in that different communities recognize different authorities.
- No authority is without some degree of bias.
- Authority can be demonstrated through subject expertise and the ability to communicate that expertise in a persuasive manner.
- Authority, particularly within an academic discipline, is likely to change over time as new knowledge is created and community values change.

The indicators of authority referenced in the CRAAP test reflect various considerations an expert may take into account. Unlike the novice learner, however, the expert does not treat all indicators equally and does not give them equal weight in all contexts. The introduction of the Framework and of
threshold concepts into the information literacy classroom has changed the authority conversation. Instead of asking students to answer simple questions about authority (who is the author?, what are an author’s credentials?), we are prompting them to ask deep questions about the nature and provenance of authority, how it might be tempered, and why it should be questioned.

Undoubtedly, there are several possible instructional models that might replace the skills-based one-shot with something that promotes discussion over an extended period. The instruction we describe in this chapter follows a model of collaboration between an information literacy expert and an expert in another discipline, i.e., a librarian and a linguist. Given this model, we were particularly concerned with identifying overlapping or complementary pedagogical goals. Specifically, we wondered whether the information literacy threshold concept Authority is Constructed and Contextual was entirely distinct from concepts of authority in linguistics. Noting many similarities between the two, we hypothesized that guiding a student through one liminal space would help them pass through the other.

In the next section, we introduce authority in the context of linguistics, guided by Meyer and Land’s discussion of kinds of troublesome knowledge (alien, ritualized, inert, tacit) and identify parallels between the threshold concept Linguistic Authority is Constructed and Contextual (henceforth linguistic authority) with the information literacy threshold concept Authority is Constructed and Contextual.

Parallels between linguistics and information literacy: Two authority threshold concepts

For most students entering the linguistics classroom, it is simply common sense that there is a right way to speak and write a language. The dictionary tells us whether something is a word, what it means, and how it should be pronounced, and English teachers and stylebooks tell us which words can and can’t be strung together into sentences. Rarely do people ask who it is that decides what language is good and what is bad.

As it turns out, it’s not linguists. In contrast to prescriptivists, who explain how language ought to be used, linguists are said to be descriptivists. Investigating language from a scientific perspective, linguists aim not to lay judgment on language use, but to describe and ultimately explain language. Contrary to the assumption of most laypeople, there is no absolute authority on language. As in other scientific fields, linguists make a hypothesis, they follow a set of procedures to test the hypothesis, and they and their peers then evaluate the strength
of the evidence in support of the hypothesis. Linguistics is therefore a scientific authority concerned with evaluating theories of language. Prescriptive authority, the kind most people take for granted, is entirely socially constructed.

This conception of linguistic authority is foundational in linguistics. For the learner, it can be quite troublesome because it is alien to them. For better or worse, the educational system recognizes only one particular variety of language as standard. What the system fails to recognize (although many individual educators may) is that language changes and has many varieties. There is a wealth of evidence, since at least Roman times, of older generations complaining about younger generations and their destruction of language. (It hasn’t happened yet.) Even in the USA, with its predominance of monolingual English speakers, one finds regional variation. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with recognizing a standard variety of a language, the choice typically privileges one group, i.e., educated, white middle/upper class men, while stigmatizing others.

The information literacy threshold concept Authority is Constructed and Contextual is similarly alien. In a preliminal state, students are dualistic thinkers in both domains. Information is classified into good and bad just as language is classified into good and bad. In both domains, this apparently straightforward binary contrast is revealed instead to be something complex. In both domains, the contrast is revealed as socially constructed rather than inherent.

Linguistic authority is also troublesome because it can become ritualized and remain inert. After several semesters studying linguistics, students may easily repeat certain talking points—e.g., all language varieties are equally complex, there is no primitive language—while failing to understand the motivation behind them. In an attempt to reconcile the troublesome knowledge with their preliminal state, students may at times adopt nihilistic and subjectivist positions. For example, rather than seeing linguists as investigating a complex human phenomenon scientifically, they may explain the linguist’s task as finding ways to validate bad language. They may conclude that language is completely unconstrained and therefore not something that can be studied systematically. They may also fail to transfer the knowledge to their daily lives. Students continue to encounter and participate in social judgments, including linguistic discrimination, without recognizing them as socially constructed.

Similarly, with respect to information literacy, a student may be able to name indicators of authority but may fail to attach the indicators to any kind of meaning. For example, peer-reviewed is literally a box that must be checked, but there is no sense of what it means or how it might be related to authority in the student’s own life. Students may be able to recite that there is no such thing as unbiased information but continue to utilize information as
if it is unbiased. Again, and in order to reconcile the troublesome knowledge about constructed and contextual authority, they become mistrustful of all information, even while continuing to select and use information tacitly.

Linguistic authority can be troublesome because it requires students to access tacit knowledge. We all use more than one variety of language and, for the most part, we know which contexts require which variety. Bilinguals, for example, know when to use which language when speaking with other bilinguals, sometimes switching within the same sentence. We know how to talk to people inside and outside of our geographical community, our community of practice, our age group, or our gender. The authorities in each context—the people who judge the social appropriateness of our language—are different. We know how and when to change our language, but this knowledge is largely tacit.

Similarly, students are not blank slates with respect to information. No one treats all information equally. In their daily lives, students frequently make determinations about the authority of information, e.g., whether to take an umbrella based on the information presented in the weather app on a smartphone. Clearly, they use criteria (indicators) to arrive at these determinations, but these criteria are tacit: they do not access them consciously and may struggle to identify them explicitly when prompted.

Once students see linguistic authority as constructed and contextual, rather than absolute and invariant, their perception of language is radically transformed. Language is no longer a discrete set of skills to be mastered from experts; rather, language is exposed as a complex natural and social phenomenon investigated scientifically by a community of scholars. Having crossed this threshold, an individual is unlikely to return to a view of language as inherently right and wrong.

In addition to being troublesome, then, the concept that linguistic authority is constructed and contextual is transformative, integrative, and irreversible—four of the five likely characteristics of a threshold concept identified by Meyer and Land. Whether it has the property of boundedness is less clear. Indeed, we have emphasized this threshold concept in linguistics precisely because it shares so many similarities and parallels with the related information literacy threshold concept Authority is Constructed and Contextual and lends itself to transferability for the learner. We also note that Meyer and Land did not intend their set of characteristics as an exhaustive checklist.

**Entering two liminal spaces**

Given the parallels we had identified between the two threshold concepts of authority, we designed an exercise, the purpose of which was twofold: to confront our students with the complexity of authority as it relates to linguistic
authority; and to confront them with the complexity of authority as it relates to information.

We begin, briefly, with some background about a linguistic phenomenon called vocal fry. The sounds of language vary according to different settings of our vocal folds. One of these settings is the configuration of our vocal folds, which we use to distinguish between words like fat and vat. At this point, we invite you to hold your hand to your throat and make a \texttt{ffffffffffffff} sound, followed by a \texttt{vvvvvvvvvvvvv} sound. The [f] sound is produced with the vocal folds held apart. The [v] sound is produced with vibration. These are the most common ways of manipulating the vocal folds, but the focus of this assignment was a configuration of the vocal folds called vocal fry. People liken vocal fry (a.k.a. creaky voice) to the sound of a creaky door or bacon frying in a hot pan.

The motivation for using vocal fry in English is not well understood, but linguists note that laypeople have a strong reaction to it, and the phenomenon has received a lot of attention, not just from academics but also the media (e.g., \textit{The New York Times}, \textit{The Today Show}, NPR, \textit{Science}, \textit{Time}). For this reason, it provided a nice opportunity to engage students in a discussion of authority. Having already discussed the mechanics of vocal fry, we introduced students to a set of carefully chosen sources, in a deliberate order, beginning with two television news clips.

In the first clip, an anchor explains that experts believe reality television (especially the Kardashians) could be to blame for a new fad called vocal fry. The piece features two scientific authorities: an Ear, Nose, and Throat physician and a speech language therapist. One asserts that vocal fry “probably started back with Meredith Grey and Grey’s Anatomy where she had this very tired sounding voice.” The other describes a so-called treatment. The reporter narrates the piece with judgmental language: vocal fry is “creeping in” to the conversations of young women and you need to “catch yourself doing it” to reverse it.

In the second clip, the host questions a guest panel about challenges faced by millennials, including vocal fry and its potential impact on employment. The panelists, all over forty, include a clinical psychologist/television personality, a senior executive from Monster Worldwide, and a journalist. Again, reality television is blamed as well as the poor social skills and immaturity of millennials.

During the subsequent in-class discussion, it was clear that the students were used to approaching news media with skepticism, but did so, initially, in a perfunctory manner, where they recited the “right” answer, e.g., there was bias in media reports because of the need to sell advertising/attract viewers. With some prompting, students noted that some of the experts had subject expertise, but the students nonetheless disagreed with the experts’ claims,
some visibly offended at the targeting of young women. One student pointed out how the media reports took advantage of the (constructed) authority that our society lends to doctors and scientists. It became clear that indicators of authority—in particular, credentials, reputation, subject expertise—were imperfect and context-sensitive.

Subsequent classes required students to read two research papers which spurred the media interest around vocal fry (both peer-reviewed articles from outside the discipline of linguistics), an episode of the podcast *This American Life*, and two blog posts by academic linguists. Reading the articles, students discovered that neither claimed that vocal fry was more common now than in the past and neither claimed that vocal fry was more prevalent among youth or women. The podcast explicitly discusses some of the misreporting, and the blog posts detail many shortcomings of the original research articles themselves.

In many respects, this exercise resembles the kind of information literacy activity that librarians have been leading for many years, well before any discussion of threshold concepts. We do believe, however, the exercise is innovative in two ways. First, approaching our teaching via threshold concepts allowed us to move away from a one-shot model for information literacy instruction and instead to anticipate that students would take different paths through the liminal space. We designed the exercise not expecting students to acquire a skill by the end; rather, we designed the exercise to introduce troublesome knowledge and to promote a discussion around it, which could continue throughout the course of a semester rather than a single meeting.

Second, we anticipated and encouraged transfer. With respect to linguistic authority, the vocal fry exercise challenged students to move through a liminal space from a binary understanding of language as inherently good and bad toward an understanding that judgments about language are complex and socially constructed. At the same time, students were moving through a liminal space from a binary understanding of information as inherently good and bad to an understanding of information as complex and socially constructed. Passing through one space, we hoped, would help the student to pass through the other.

On this subject, we are influenced by the work of Kuglitsch, for whom teaching for transfer is a primary goal of the information literacy instructor: “If our aim is to teach students the generalized skills of information literacy, educational research suggests that the best way to do so is to explicitly situate those generalized skills of the Framework in a domain familiar to students. Students can then use their local knowledge of the domain to support and abstract the general principles of information literacy.”

In addition to situating the information literacy threshold concept Authority is Constructed and Contextual locally within the domain of linguis-
tics, we are going one step further and relating it to a distinct threshold concept in the discipline of linguistics.

**CRAAP: From checklist to discussion prompt**

In the next exercise, approximately a week later, we aimed to move the discussion from simply recognizing information literacy authority as complex (i.e., non-binary) to exploring the specific ways in which it is complex (i.e., constructed and contextual) in the context of the discipline of linguistics.

The context for this exercise is a presentation in which students must choose an unfamiliar language and prepare an authoritative, engaging, and focused fifteen-minute presentation that provided the class with general background information about the language (such as language family, sound inventory) and a discussion on the week’s topic.

In preparation for their presentation, we asked students to search for resources on the phonetics and phonology of their language, first in the Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA) database, and then the following week on the web. Students also annotated their selections with a CRAAP score and a brief note about how the resource might inform their presentation.

Importantly, our purpose in introducing the CRAAP test was not to give students an easy tool or shortcut for identifying authoritative sources; rather, we intended the CRAAP test as a conversation starter. The student submissions were graded only for completion, and we did not provide students with a correct answer. We then chose a handful of these resources and required all students to review that same set of resources, to post their score, and publish their rationale on the course website. The postings formed the basis of an in-class discussion.

The decision not to provide a correct or model answer proved troublesome for many students. Some students were also distressed by the considerable variation and inconsistency in scores between and among individual students. The scores of authority were, like authority itself, constructed and contextual.

The discussion of students’ rationale was particularly fruitful. Collectively, students identified a wealth of positive and negative indicators of authority. For students still uncomfortable with the understanding of authority as complex, i.e., those who desired sources to be either good or bad, finding indicators provided a point of entry into the conversation. On the other hand, they and their peers quickly discovered that different students valued the indicators differently.
As one example, we discussed Ethnologue, a web resource cataloguing statistics on 7,457 languages. Most students noted that it was currently in its nineteenth edition, had been in publication since 1951, and was updated within the previous year. Students recognized these as indicators of reputation and recency and thus as positive indicators of authority. In many cases, however, the individual facts presented on a language entry were not credited to specific individuals. A subset of students viewed this as a negative indicator of authority. This flowed into a discussion about the authority of organizations. Ethnologue is published by SIL International, a non-profit Christian missionary organization with close ties to the Wycliffe Global Alliance of Bible translation organizations. Some students worried that the missionary goals of the organization negatively influenced Ethnologue’s authority, while other students maintained that the influence, if any, was marginal. Nearly all students agreed that, for the particular context of the presentation, Ethnologue was sufficiently authoritative to be used as a resource. Without taking a position ourselves, we happily pointed out that the class mirrored the field of linguistics itself, which uses Ethnologue widely for many pragmatic purposes but is divided in the amount of authority it accords to Ethnologue, for many of the same reasons identified by the students.

Unlike the vocal fry exercise, the CRAAP exercise was more actively metacognitive. In the vocal fry exercise, bloggers and podcasters did a lot of the work identifying specific critiques of authority. In this exercise, students had to generate their own set of indicators and determine the appropriate weight of each indicator.

We intended the vocal fry exercise described in the previous section to move students away from binarity into the liminal space. We intended the CRAAP exercise, and others omitted here for space, to guide students through the liminal space by refining their understanding of information literacy authority as constructed and contextual. We were challenged, however, when it came to determining how to recognize when students had left the liminal space and crossed the threshold. To what extent were students thinking like an expert, either like an information studies scholar or a linguist? True expertise is arrived at by, among other things, an extended period of time studying a specific subject, and so it was unreasonable to expect that students would exhibit true expert behavior.

In the following final instructional example of this chapter, we exposed students to the academic culture of the discipline of linguistics. We designed an exercise, first, to emphasize how authority may change over time, as new knowledge is created and community values change, second, to situate information literacy authority in the context of the discipline of linguistics, and third, to help students see themselves as co-constructors of authority, as emerging members of the disciplinary community.
Joining the community of experts

In academia, as in the world at large, the discipline of linguistics is often little known. Although many universities have a separate department of linguistics, people researching language in higher education may also be found in departments of anthropology, classics, computer science, education, English, law, philosophy, psychology, speech language pathology, sociology, and of specific languages, to name a few.

There are at least three reasons for this fragmented distribution. First, the breadth and depth of subfields reflect the considerable complexity of human language. Many aspects of language are regular and rule-governed, like the laws of physics or the functions of biological systems. This is true for at least the subfields of phonetics, phonology, syntax, and semantics. Other aspects of language are, by contrast, influenced by human culture. This is true especially for at least the subfields of discourse analysis, anthropological linguistics, and sociolinguistics. For this reason, linguistics departments may be variously housed in colleges of humanities, social sciences, cognitive sciences, behavioral sciences, or physical sciences.

Second, modern linguistics, conceived of as the scientific study of language, consolidated as a discrete discipline relatively late, in the last half of the twentieth century. The founding of modern linguistics as a separate and unified discipline is usually credited to MIT linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky and his work in the 1950s that challenged B.F. Skinner’s behaviorism.

Third, Chomsky has in some ways been equally as divisive as he has been unifying. Chomsky and his followers championed the informal collection of introspective judgments as a primary source of data in linguistic theory. Introspective judgments provide negative evidence, such as the ungrammaticality of sentences like I’d like to can swim or words like bnick and psab (compare: blick and prab). Chomsky pronounced that experimental laboratory methodologies of the type used in psychology were “a waste of time and energy,” and Chomsky was equally critical of corpora (i.e., collections of naturally occurring text or speech), dismissing them as useless and “wildly skewed.” Chomsky’s strong positions alienated language scholars using other methodologies, and an environment of hostility both from and against so-called armchair linguists like Chomsky dominated until the 1990s with the emergence of interdisciplinary research cultures.

The novice, of course, knows little if any of this, including the librarian. Faced with a list of search results from Google Scholar or LLBA, how can the novice determine which works will be considered more or less authoritative? Yet this is exactly the context that an expert brings to bear in evaluating authority.
Focusing particularly on the division created by Chomsky around research methodology, we selected a set of abbreviated quotations from Chomsky and other historically prominent linguists and presented them in class as Twitter posts. As an in-class activity, students also read and discussed work by academic linguists who use recently developed methodologies, such as experiments that use crowdsourcing like Amazon Turk, to question the validity of more traditional introspective methods used by Chomsky and his followers. Finally, in a homework assignment, students were asked to search the LLBA and propose several different methodologies that might be appropriate for their own final research project and to anticipate how each methodology would be received by different communities of linguists.

Because students had been exposed to the disciplinary culture and history, students were more successful in selecting an appropriate methodology from recently published linguistics articles. Rather than viewing the choice as unquestionably authoritative because it appeared in a peer-reviewed journal or arbitrary because all choices were equally scientific, they were able to recognize that their choice aligned them with a particular community of scholars. By choosing a methodology, the student was effectively granting more weight to the authority of one community over another.

Conclusion

We want students to be able to both understand and transfer generalized information literacy knowledge such as Authority is Constructed and Contextual to different contexts. By situating information literacy learning within a discipline and even seeking parallels to disciplinary threshold concepts, we set up the students to transfer their understanding.

Threshold concepts provide us with a common language to talk about our pedagogical goals, moving the librarian-faculty collaboration from superficial to substantive. Lacking the disciplinary context, the librarian’s role in the authority conversation would have been marginalized, with authority being presented in an oversimplified and generic fashion, and less interesting and engaging for the students. Lacking the information literacy context, the linguist would likely have failed to recognize Authority is Constructed and Contextual as a concept needing to be taught, and the opportunity to connect to the linguistic threshold concept, Linguistic Authority is Constructed and Contextual would be lost.

We realize that this is not the only path to teaching for transfer. However, we found that the language of threshold concepts significantly changed the tenor and substance of our collaboration, which was immediately reflected in the way we approached our teaching and had a direct impact on student learning. It also helped to mitigate some of the typical barriers to librari-
an-faculty collaboration. Faculty spend less time reflecting about their teaching, given the value institutions place on scholarship. Faculty may sometimes be aware of disciplinary blind spots, but they are less likely to recognize the extent and nature of their own expert information literacy. Finally, there are stereotypes about library instruction and faculty expectations of this instruction as skills-based, orientation sessions that must be overcome.

Our approach, in many respects, was totally unremarkable. The students searched databases and they evaluated sources. Students used the CRAAP test, keyword searching, and a specific citation style. These and other touchstones remained but were in service of something bigger, as we were liberated to focus on the learner’s journey and enjoy the rewards and challenges of teaching big ideas.

Notes
5. Threshold concepts are not widely recognized in linguistics. We identified this threshold concept in the course of our own discussions.
6. The earliest example is usually credited to Horace, Book III of Odes.


