

Research Assessment Exercise 2020

Impact Overview Statement

University: The University of Hong Kong (HKU)

Unit of Assessment (UoA): UoA 33 Linguistics and Language Studies

Total number of eligible staff of the university in the UoA: 7

(1) Context

The Department of Linguistics (UoA) has long been aware of the importance of producing research with high theoretical significance and valuable applications that deliver benefits to a range of non-academic groups. During the assessment period, our innovative research has generated impact in three focused areas: 1) *Empirical linguistics and psycholinguistics*: research has directly affected medical practice through an improved understanding of the structural and functional basis of dyslexia. This has effected change in clinical procedures and educational policy, as well as raised awareness of the benefits of early bilingualism; 2) *Language description and documentation*: research has led to greater awareness and capturing of endangered dialects in Hong Kong and abroad; and 3) *The study of language diversity using “big data” methods*: research has directly led to the creation and curation of linguistic corpora that are now preserved and made accessible to the public. Our research has had impact on a range of beneficiaries, including local schools, language centres, educators, speech therapists, medical practitioners and patients, and the general public.

(2) Approach to Impact

The Department facilitates mentoring on funding applications, evidence gathering and measurement of impact through regular departmental meetings and sharing of expertise between junior and senior staff. We encourage members to apply for the Research Grant Council’s Research Impact Fund (RIF), as well as for knowledge exchange funding to support impact initiatives. Donohue, for example, was awarded an HKU Knowledge Exchange (KE) grant for her 2019 project in Nepal. Pathways to impact include the documentation and promotion of endangered languages, the establishment of strategic institutional collaborations, and media engagement.

Promoting Awareness and Creating Resources for Linguistic and Cultural Heritage Preservation

The Department recognises the importance of documenting and raising public awareness of undescribed and little-described languages for cultural heritage preservation. An example of this is Donohue’s research and documentation of three endangered Chinese dialects in Hong Kong: Waitauwah, Shuilowah (Tankawah) and Hakkawah. These dialects are included in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government’s First Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory of Hong Kong and will soon be lost due to sociolinguistic pressures. Initiatives to engage the public in preservation efforts include a TEDx Youth talk, the setting up of a dedicated website featuring short videos about minority language communities, and a two-day exhibition “Living on the Water” in 2016, which drew 1,400 visitors. Donohue’s endeavours to secure the future of the endangered Tibeto-Burman language Nubri resulted in nearly 500 villagers in a remote valley in Nepal receiving eye treatment. A series of eye clinics co-organised with the prestigious Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology in Kathmandu brought members of the community together in a single location, which facilitated their participation in the development of a Nubri writing system and enabled more than 50 villagers to regain their sight through cataract surgery. Information about this project has been disseminated through press coverage, a photo exhibition, and a website. Primary data gathered through Yakpo’s field research on the creole language Pichi informed the language section of a commercial travel guide (Bradt travel guide for Equatorial Guinea, 2015, UK), which was also published as an online book (with close to 900 downloads in 2019). Linguistic corpora have been created from field data and placed in publicly accessible archives, such as the Language Archive of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES), and the Atlas for Pidgin and Creole Language Structures Online (APiCs), for use by researchers, educators and speech pathologists, among others.

Collaborations and Partnerships

We collaborate with local and international institutions to transfer our research-based knowledge into educational and clinical practices. Siok has established collaborations with hospitals in China, including Beijing Xuanwu Hospital and the First Affiliated Hospital of Zhengzhou University, to help aphasic patients regain their language skills. Siok, Do, and Havenhill are collaborating with educational organisations, such as Hong Kong Scholars, to develop scientifically-based phonics and reading instruction approaches for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Matthews is serving as a consultant for the private education company DR-Max's bilingual programme.

Media Engagement

The Department has disseminated research findings with high theoretical significance and impact by organising press conferences with the support of the University. Tan and Siok's research findings on dyslexia and the impact of non-alphabetic writing on reading skills were featured in over 150 international media outlets, including Associated Press, AFP Reuters, CNN, BBC, TIME, Forbes, Newsweek, New York Times, Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, USA Today, and The Economist. Through the dissemination of this research, educators and speech therapists have become aware of the fact that dyslexia should be treated differently across cultures; neurosurgeons have changed their surgical practices to reduce post-operative language disorders; and China's Ministry of Education implemented compulsory calligraphy classes in primary schools to strengthen students' writing skills. Matthews' work on early bi- and multilingualism and Cantonese grammar has been widely reported in the press (BBC, SCMP, RTHK, Apple Daily), helping to make his book on Cantonese grammar (the first-ever in English) the go-to reference for many foreigners wanting to learn Cantonese. Yakpo has spoken about his research in African languages on radio and television (BBC, Ohm TV, RTHK). His media appearances on BBC news have led to an invitation to serve as a judge on the 2019 BBC Africa Pidgin English essay competition. Coupé's "big-data" research has received wide international coverage in The Economist, Science Daily and the Language Magazine.

(3) Strategy and Plans

The Department is in the process of setting up a formal mechanism to ensure that members are provided with support for impact generating activities tied to their research. This is especially important now that impact is embedded in the University's appraisal, recruitment and promotion processes, and in all applications for General Research Fund and Early Career Scheme grants. The Department recognises that the extent and level of the impact is contingent on the quality of the underpinning research, thus the unit will continue to produce high quality, ground-breaking research in the three focused areas. Over the next five years, we plan to strengthen our strategic partnerships with Chinese hospitals and institutes and secure research grants (e.g. RIF and National Natural Science Foundation of China grants) to promote findings on Chinese reading and dyslexia. By combining our expertise in phonetics (Do), phonology (Havenhill), bilingualism (Matthews) and reading (Siok), we will be working with local schools to devise a tailor-made instructional approach to ESL. We will add to our work on description and documentation of endangered languages by producing videos on Hong Kong's minority dialects with the hope of ensuring their survival. Donohue is using KE funding to create a health leaflet in the Nubri language.

(4) Relationship to Case Studies

The case study demonstrates how the Department's research is impact-oriented from the start (improvement of the treatment for Chinese dyslexia and applications for neurosurgeons), how we build institutional partnerships by means of which research findings can be put into practice for the benefit of the public (partnerships with Chinese hospitals), and how the Department raises public awareness and disseminates research findings through active engagement with the media. The collaboration with Chinese hospitals has led to co-created, interdisciplinary and sustainable research which is helping us to better understand the underlying mechanisms of language processing and develop Chinese-specific brain mapping to protect the postoperative language functions of patients.