Editorial

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An ethics for linguistics? What, why, and how?

1 Why ethics, why now?

Academics, teachers in higher education and researchers in general, tend to view ourselves as having entered this profession out of love for our subject matter (in our case, languages and linguistics), and a passion for knowledge and for sharing that knowledge with others. Yet, academia has, a little too often in the past few years, been in the news for the wrong reasons. These reasons have included data fabrication, sham papers and peer-review fraud, issues of academic freedom and freedom of speech, transgressive behaviour and cancel culture (at the individual level) as well as academic boycotts (at the collective one), but also concerns for diversity and inclusion that have generated, among others, calls to "decolonize the curriculum" from different quarters. These issues affect not only individual career trajectories but also entire fields and their subject matters, and the perception of those fields by the public at large. Moreover, they have not been limited to specific fields or countries; rather, ethics concerns are shared by and affect academics across the globe.[1]

The response has, in many cases, involved some kind of sanction or expanded guidelines, spelling out (once more) the standards to which the academic enterprise should be held. To some, this increased amount of regulatory oversight might feel like an ethics 'on overdrive'. Yet, this response is justified, once it is realized that what is at stake is not only an individual researcher's ability to continue carrying out

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1 These problems are not new. The first international conference on "Scientific data audit, policies and quality assurance" was held in 1989, followed by the founding of the journal *Accountability in Research* in that same year (https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/gacr20). While some of the issues touched on in that journal's first issue continue to resonate, it is the scale and spread of the corresponding phenomena over disciplines and countries in our days that make for the ethics crisis in academia described here.

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research – whether publicly or privately funded – but also how this research is viewed by society, in terms of its reliability and usefulness, factors which in turn feed back into the public image of academia and the extent to which future generations are attracted to it. The debate over ethics is, in other words, nothing less than an existential one for the future of academia, giving us all sufficient reason to be at least informed about (if not actively involved in) it. One can hardly continue to carry out research in the 21st century without considering the impact of that research on others, on society at large, on the environment, but also on oneself. While within a single journal issue it is impossible to go into all of these aspects in depth, D'Arcy and Bender's broad definition of ethics as "the ethical considerations of producing research, knowledge, dialogue, process, curriculum, and technology that is more beneficial than harmful to all those affected by the work (scientists, participants, users)" (2023: 63) seems like a good starting point and is also the one we will be adopting here.

Just as the importance of ethics itself cannot be over-emphasized, the timing is also important. We live in a world where threats to democracy, wars, and widening inequalities abide; but also post-truth, fake news, the effects of climate change, and loss of trust in research are daily occurrences. If some of these problems are old, others are new and created by the technological advances of the past couple of hundred years. Our world is different from the post-WWII world in response to whose needs the ethics principles underpinning modern science were first articulated. In the current socio-political climate, rights conquered over the past century and until recently considered universal (e.g., rights to national sovereignty, women's rights) are challenged and relativized. By redefining these rights as political, they become contestable and removable rather than universal. Where do we, as scientists, stand on these matters? This special issue stems from the sorely felt need for researchers, linguists in particular, to leave their comfort zone and deal with the consequences, value, and impact of their research on life on earth now and in the longer term. This is no longer about the future of academia and the impact of our work alone (goals in which science communication plays a crucial role too). It is about the ethical responsibility of scientists to the people in their communities. As this ethical and moral responsibility is becoming clearer, so are some ways of responding to it. More than cataloguing the problems, this special issue aims to provide new ideas about how some of these problems may be addressed in order to help move this discussion forward.

2 Why linguistics?

The title of this special issue, "Ethics in Linguistics", is taken from a 5-day workshop organized at the Lorentz Center in Leiden, the Netherlands, in May 2022, where

preliminary versions of some of the papers featured here were first presented.[2] This title naturally brings up a further question: is there anything specifically linguistic about ethics, and if so, what? On the one hand, if ethics and ethical behaviour are a shared concern of academics across the board, then the same standards ought to apply to all and it ought to be enough to familiarize novices (and ourselves) with these standards in order to carry out our work with integrity. On the other hand, even among linguists, it is not uncommon to hear that ethics is only relevant to some linguistic subfields – notably, those engaged in research with "human subjects" – while others can continue to do things as they always have or with minimal adjustments (e.g., those imposed on them externally by Institutional Review Boards or IRBs; see below). Even among those working with "human subjects", ethics is sometimes treated as incidental inasmuch as they focus on language structure, studied separately from social considerations. Ethical considerations (at least with respect to participants) can then translate into simply ensuring that everyone's data is given equal weight and taken into account during the analysis.

However, as Dobrin (2025) puts it, "[b]ecause using language is part of virtually everything people do, there is hardly a human activity in which there would be nothing of interest for linguists to study". This omni-presence of language means that studying it has consequences that easily extend beyond those for people who are currently alive to take in the impact of technology on the present and future of humanity as well as consequences at the societal, national, and species levels. This expanded range of consequences sets linguistics apart from other fields of inquiry that do not deal with a subject as integral to our individual and social lives as language(s). It also creates a need for solutions customized to the nature of language and linguistic inquiry that are not simply copied over from other fields. A better question to ask, therefore, is: *who is impacted by our work and how?* Is it individuals (be that ourselves or others)? Or rather groups of people, entire "speech communities" (Bloomfield 1933; problematic as the term might be; see Eckert 2014), including our workplaces? Or is it rather less tangible aspects, such as perceptions (including stereotypes) and claims (to territories, resources, …) that our work can affect? And does it do so directly or indirectly? If the answer to any of these questions is yes – and, it seems to me, it could hardly be otherwise, for even the mere act of naming the variety one is working with implies a decision about who has the power to do that (Vrzić 2025; Chandra et al. 2025) – then all linguistic work entails at least some of the above kinds of consequences and, with them, ethical risks we should be aware of and prepared to minimize.

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2 For the full list of participants and the programme, see https://www.lorentzcenter.nl/ethics-in-linguistics.html (last accessed 20 December 2024).

Importantly, the notion of minimizing risk, as D'Arcy and Bender are quick to remind us, "does not mean no risk […] regulatory oversight […] is not about removing all risk but rather about minimizing opportunities for harm as much as possible" (2023: 53). Yet, the idea of (more) ethical oversight is often met with resistance because of a widespread belief that the work of a linguist should be descriptive, not prescriptive, from which the further view that the committed linguist is a bad linguist can easily follow. This view, however, is rather short-sighted. Not only do others, such as language educators, forensic scientists, lawyers, environmentalists, and so on, routinely look to linguists for insights into how language(s) work in order to use them most effectively for their purposes, but also *within* modern (socio)linguistics it has been clear for some time now that linguists are inevitably also social actors who had better acknowledge and carry this responsibility openly. In this vein, Labov (1982) proposed two principles, the principle of error correction (responsibility to correct public perceptions about language varieties and their speakers when they are mistaken) and the principle of debt incurred (responsibility to use the outcomes of research to benefit the community of speakers who enabled the research in the first place). While not every linguist may see themselves as a linguistic activist in the sense of De Korne (2021), that is, as "social actors […] contribut[ing] to the elusive goal of linguistic equality or justice through their language activism practices", our work has consequences we can neither always control nor afford to ignore. The principles of error correction and debt incurred are often cited as cornerstones of how to handle the social responsibility that flows from those consequences.

But there is a second set of reasons, beyond these wide-ranging consequences, why linguists specifically ought to take an interest in ethically conducted research. This second set of reasons concern the quality of the research, and in particular research validity. One may link here to the principles of Open Science (Liu et al. 2023; Spellman et al. 2017), that is, ideas about accountability, documenting one's methods, and replicability of findings, which are increasingly gaining ground as benchmarks of good-quality research beyond the medical and natural sciences where they originated. These benchmarks can be implemented differently in different linguistic subfields. While replicability, for instance, is a hallmark of some psycholinguistic and applied linguistic research,[3] it cannot be among the goals of linguistic anthropological research that analyses language in the rich contexts where it occurs. Yet, even in this second case, closely documenting one's methods provides useful insights into the dynamics that shaped those data and can be useful when it comes to comparing the findings of different projects engaging with similar questions and/or

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3 The importance of replicability for language studies is recognized by the IRIS replication award: https://www.iris-database.org/replication-award/.

communities as well as for any future parties wishing to make sense of a project and its history in context, including dealing with so-called 'legacy data', especially materials that only become available once the researcher has died.[4]

An ethics of accountability thus depends upon a notion of researcher positionality, that is, positioning oneself vis-à-vis the phenomena and communities one is studying and being self-reflective and explicit about one's own epistemological commitments and reasons for doing this research. It is an ethical prerequisite to acknowledge how who *we* (the researchers) are is reflected in and constrains some aspects of our findings while enabling others. In other words, rather than making ourselves invisible – which runs the risk of creating an aura of infallibility that is incompatible with science as the continuous *quest for* the truth – positionality involves taking responsibility for our findings by making ourselves and our role as researchers visible and acknowledging the existence of other viewpoints, not represented in our own research. While at first sight this may sound redundant, naïve or, what is worse, self-serving, the simple act of acknowledging the existence of other frameworks or points of view, without necessarily engaging with them, should be seen – and practised – as an act of intellectual humility that emphasizes the limits of our knowledge and what we can and cannot be held accountable for.

Another way in which attention to ethics can enhance the validity of our research is by encouraging us to acknowledge the positionality not only of ourselves *qua* researchers but also that of our participants *qua* research participants. Through often subconscious processes of self-censorship, self-presentation, and the like, larger social groupings such as 'nations', 'genders', and so on inevitably have an impact on individual speaker judgements, however these are obtained. Research participants, in other words, are not positioned outside of social hierarchies themselves but rather operate from within them and may re-enact them through their judgements. Speaker judgements, in this sense, are also socially positioned and should be acknowledged as such – which, once more, brings us back to closely documenting the methods and circumstances in which they were obtained. The important question, from an ethical point of view, is not what type of theory the data are used to build, but rather that the full complexity of the data, including the positionality of their producers, be acknowledged and preserved in the research record. Chandra et al.'s (2025) statement that "[t]he speakers are, for G[enerative] L[inguistics], the ultimate authorities and the owners of their data" can thus be taken to highlight the relevance of ethical considerations (including ways in which they can be met; e.g., through detailed documenting

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4 On developing a theory of meta-documentation (including information about the identity of the stakeholders, the attitudes of language consultants, the methodology of the researcher, the biography and history of the project, and any agreements entered into) for language documentation projects, see Austin (2013).

of methods) to all kinds of linguistic research, no matter under which theoretical umbrella this is carried out. Once more, we do not all have to conceive of language in the same way in order to uphold the same overarching set of ethical standards (in fact, requiring that we all conceive of language in the same way would be unethical in itself, implying that another's way of conceiving of language is less valid than our own). But we do have a responsibility to treat participants (and ourselves) as the complex and socially positioned individuals we truly are.

A final way in which ethical principles can enhance the validity of linguistic research is by enabling more inclusive theories and perspectives beyond those based on WEIRD (Henrich et al. 2010) and abled populations, and mainstream English ways of speaking at the expense of MIND (Minority, Indigenous, Non-standard(ized), and Dialect) varieties (Kirk 2023). At first, this might seem like an elementary lesson that any linguistics student learns with their first exposure to an unfamiliar language and which has been integral to progress in the field since its earliest beginnings in the comparative reconstruction of IE (Jones 1807), the work of American structuralists with Native American languages (Bloomfield 1933), and that of early ethnographers in the Pacific (Malinowski 1922). Yet, still today, and despite strides in documentation work, by far the most researched language is English and the majority of our theories are based on the structure of this (and a handful of other Western) language(s) and exemplified using English-language examples (on the associated dangers see, among others, Ameka and Terkourafi 2019; Evans and Levinson 2009; Kidd and Garcia 2022). Without going into the reasons for this,[5] ethical considerations can play a role here by encouraging (or even requiring) us to break with convenience and develop more inclusive methods of participation in language research (e.g., Choy et al. 2022). This includes expanding the 'canon' of standard bibliographical references and granting more visibility to the work of scholars from other research traditions who may have been silenced or made invisible for a variety of reasons until now (Gibson et al. 2024). As with the voices of the participants who provide us with data for analysis, the (often emic) voices of all researchers must be given equal weight and taken into account during our theory building.

3 The origins of modern research ethics (and why we need to move beyond them)

Yet, even if all linguistic research has ethical consequences that extend beyond the here and now and apply equally to all branches of linguistics and not just those

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5 But see Halliday (2003) for how the primacy of English as the global lingua franca of our era can become a self-fulfilling prophecy by affecting the language's 'fitness' to serve this purpose in return.

engaging in research with human subjects, as argued above, it does not necessarily follow that linguistics needs its own set of ethical principles. This need rather follows from the origins of modern research ethics outside of linguistics, which have left their imprint on how ethics is conceived of and practised across many academic fields, including linguistics, today.

These origins lie firmly within bio-medical research, specifically, the medical experimentation abuses of Nazi doctors during World War II, which led to the creation, in 1947, of the Nuremberg Code, the first attempt to deal with ethical issues in research from a legal perspective. This was succeeded in 1964 by the Declaration of Helsinki, which was formulated to meet the international need for a more specific code of ethics for bio-medical research. Parallel to these developments, events in the US, not least doctors' abuses during the 40-year Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932–1972; for a recent assessment, see Reverby 2009), gradually led to the establishment of institutional review boards (IRBs) at US institutions receiving federal funding for research. A landmark in this process was the 1979 Belmont Report, which established three general principles that continue to be applied to "human subjects" research, as research involving people came to be known. These principles are: (1) Beneficence: to maximize benefits for science, humanity, and research participants and to avoid or minimize risk or harm, (2) Respect: to protect the autonomy and privacy rights of participants, and (3) Justice: to ensure the fair distribution among persons and groups of the costs and benefits of research.

Yet, even the designation "human subjects" for participants in scientific research points to the way they are perceived in bio-medical research, which is not always appropriate to describe their role in other types of research. For instance, in contemporary linguistic documentation projects, participants are often referred to as "consultants", highlighting their higher level of native language expertise compared with that of the linguists who are there to learn from them. More generally, the practical implementation of the principles of Beneficence, Respect, and Justice in bio-medicine has led to requirements which are not always in tune with the goals of other fields. Two of these, the requirement to anonymize participant contributions, and the requirement to destroy records after a period of time, can, depending on circumstances, be inappropriate or downright counter-productive for research in some humanities fields, including linguistics, where future co-operation with particular communities sometimes depends on publicly acknowledging their contributions to the research (see also Schifano et al. 2025), and records of earlier ways of speaking are necessary for long-term diachronic research. These short-comings are not unrelated to the fact that, partly because of their origins in bio-medical research, guidelines and codes of practice emanating from these fields do not sufficiently address cross-cultural differences affecting how ethics is understood and implemented in different cultural settings.

4 From macro-ethics to micro-ethics

The influence of the bio-medical origins of modern research ethics on how ethics is conceptualized and practised in linguistics is most immediately seen in various sets of disciplinary guidelines published by professional associations and in the decisions of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) or other institution-level committees charged with approving research involving "human subjects". Both disciplinary guidelines and IRBs are discipline-wide or institution-wide agents that operate top-down and may, in this sense, be considered components of macro-ethics, defined as "the procedural ethics of IRB protocols based on general ethical principles, which are also incorporated in professional codes of conduct" (Kubanyiova 2008: 504, after Guillemin and Gillam 2004).[6] Parallel to macro-ethics, researchers these days are increasingly acknowledging the need for a micro-ethics that will address, in a bottom-up fashion, "the everyday ethical dilemmas that arise from the specific roles and responsibilities that researchers and research participants adopt in specific research contexts" (Kubanyiova 2008: 504, after Guillemin and Gillam 2004). This distinction, which may be likened to that between statutory law (legal decision-making based on existing bodies of laws and regulations) and case law (legal decision-making based on precedent) legal systems, is useful because it highlights the complex nature of research ethics and the fact that – unlike national legal systems which opt for one or the other – *both* of these approaches are needed to adequately handle the ethical questions that arise in the conduct of our work as academic researchers.

4.1 Macro-ethics: guidelines and ethics review committees

Starting with the components of macro-ethics, few guidelines attempt to regulate what happens at international and cross-disciplinary level, and it quickly becomes obvious why that is so. As the example of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) for the protection of natural persons, which went into effect in European Union countries in 2018, makes clear, such guidelines can be too narrow in some respects (covering only "natural persons" as opposed to the wide-ranging consequences of linguistic research highlighted earlier) and too limiting in others (e.g., favouring anonymization over pseudonymization),[7] with the result that they

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6 Alternative terms for macro-ethics are regulatory ethics (Dobrin 2025) or uppercase-E Ethics (Armostis 2025).
7 Pseudonymization is the process of removing personally identifiable information – which can include names (e.g., substituting with names of equal complexity/length + origin), voice information

leave out areas that ought to be covered while simultaneously unduly restricting others. Relying (exclusively) on such guidelines thus falls short of addressing the needs of particular fields.

Disciplinary guidelines, on the other hand, are prepared by professional associations, which often, though not always, operate within particular national contexts. Within linguistics, widely cited general guidelines include those of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL), and the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), while more topic-/interest area-specific guidelines also exist for internet research, interacting with refugee and non-native speakers in high-stakes situations, indigenous linguistics, and data citation, among others.[8] Such guidelines (which, unlike the GDPR, are, strictly speaking, recommendations without any legal standing) are necessarily responding to the national contexts in which they originated and cannot, without a hint of ego-centrism, be taken to automatically apply to and bind researchers in other parts of the world. In short, when it comes to disciplinary guidelines, there is no "one size fits all" – something which their authors are well aware of and strive to address by aiming for a balance between generality and specificity in their recommendations.

A closer look at some of the existing linguistics guidelines (see Appendix) reveals that only two areas are consistently covered, namely, the ethics of data collection (focusing on informed consent) and publication ethics (especially, issues of plagiarism and data fabrication). Beyond these, different guidelines handle different issues, by, e.g., including additional recommendations about children and social media participants (focusing on consent and non-coercion), addressing deception and covert research, and ethical responsibilities toward students and colleagues. Yet

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(e.g., by changing the fundamental frequency of a speech signal), and facial information (e.g., by blurring facial features in videos or providing drawings instead of photos) – and allowing that data may be publicly shared in conferences, publications, or repositories after removal of this information. Anonymization, on the other hand, involves irreversible transformation of personal data so that it becomes permanently impossible to distinguish an individual from the rest of the data. While both are processes of minimizing risk by safeguarding participants' privacy and confidentiality, they are treated differently by GDPR requirements, which do not apply to anonymized information since the data subject is no longer separable from the rest of the data. This also removes data storage limitations: unlike personal and pseudonymized data which must be destroyed after a stated amount of time, anonymized data may be retained indefinitely. However, anonymization is not practicable for all language data (think of data shared publicly on social media) and in any case, is undesirable, since not knowing who said what to whom, when, where and why renders the data useless in most cases. The preferential treatment of anonymized versus pseudonymized data in the GDPR echoes the medical origins of research ethics and highlights how the different risks associated with different types of data have led to solutions which are not always transferable across fields.

8 For an indicative list of such guidelines, see Appendix.

other, no less sensitive areas, are left untouched (or barely covered). These concern, for instance, how vulnerable populations are defined[9] and how such populations should be labelled (which can in turn affect how participants from these groups are identified and recruited); the environmental impact of linguistics (for some suggestions, see Eisenbeiss et al. 2025); the currently very active field of the ethics of NLP and the ethical implications of doing research with Large Language Models (LLMs; see D'Arcy and Bender 2023: 57–62); and research on "dead" languages (and dead speakers), whose impact is often more indirect, affecting ideological, reputational, territorial etc. claims. These areas, which remain for the most part unaddressed by existing guidelines, are precisely among those that are proprietary to linguistics, supporting the feeling that the time is ripe for an ethics *for* linguistics and the ethical emancipation of the field.

Unlike published guidelines, the second component of macro-ethics, IRBs and ethics review committees, most commonly refers to institution-level agents in an executive role,[10] whose primary goal is to protect the institution's legal standing by ensuring that research is conducted according to existing laws and approved standards. These standards are not always discipline-specific and anecdotes abound about the contradicting demands of boards and committees unaware, or having a poor understanding, of the ethical particularities of a field. Yet approval by an ethical review committee is in many places a *sine qua non* of scientific research and projects cannot begin without it. More than that, the official 'stamp of approval' of an ethics review committee is becoming a routine requirement by publishers prior to publication and by funding bodies when competing for grants. The filtering effect of this requirement can turn ethics into a simple matter of compliance (aka rubber-stamping) or, even more detrimentally for scholars from parts of the world where institutional oversight is unavailable, an insurmountable bottleneck to the conduct and dissemination of research. Less dramatic, yet no less irritating, is the effect of the different speed and requirements of ethics review committees based

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9 Generally, "vulnerable populations" is taken to include children, prisoners, and pregnant women. However, in linguistics, other populations may be "vulnerable", such as elderly, atypical, or minority participants who may not be able to grasp fully the implications of the research in order to provide informed consent. Even among participants capable of grasping the implications of the research, those "feeling desperate and constrained, feeling indebted to or dependent on the research recruiter" may still feel compelled to take part, and should in this sense be considered "vulnerable" according to Roberts and Roberts (1999: 1028, cited in Rüdiger and Dayter 2017: 259).

10 In some cases, ethical review and approval is conducted at national level by specially appointed authorities; see, e.g., https://www.bioethics.gov.cy/moh/cnbc/cnbc.nsf/index_en/index_en?OpenDocument (Cyprus; last accessed 20 December 24), and https://etikprovningsmyndigheten.se/en/ (Sweden; last accessed 20 December 24).

in different countries, which can significantly slow down collaborative projects conducted internationally (see also Chandra et al. 2025).

Despite these difficulties, the macro-ethics components reviewed in this section have a role to play and are, in this sense, an indispensable part of the ethics process itself. IRB approval, on the one hand, ensures a modicum of equity among researchers of different stripes and may be required to meet formal eligibility requirements for publication and funding; while guidelines, on the other hand, can be used to 'educate' IRBs about the particularities of a field (e.g., the possibility of providing alternatives to written consent when the latter is deemed culturally inappropriate). This is a process in which we can all play a role by serving on ethical review committees in our institutions and engaging in their activities as an opportunity to educate and be educated. Far from being viewed as 'necessary evils' or irrelevant, then, these components of macro-ethics can be used as resources which, through continuous elaboration and mutual improvement, can help enable linguistic research and its dissemination.

4.2 Micro-ethics: ethics training and learning from case studies

At the same time, as the scope of ethics expands to new environments (e.g., online), new populations (e.g., unlikeable subjects; Rüdiger and Dayter 2017), and (uniquely) linguistic concerns (e.g., ethical implications of terms and labels for linguistic varieties), it is only natural that regulation in the form of macro-ethics lags behind. This is because, as D'Arcy and Bender (2023: 54) put it, "ethical decision-making is context-dependent and relational (to partners, collaborators, participants, communities, and the broader outcomes of our work, both within the academy and beyond)". The context-dependence and relationality of ethics makes it impossible to anticipate and codify solutions to all the possible scenarios in which linguistic research may present a risk, calling for ethical thinking 'on one's feet' instead. This creates the space and need for a micro-ethics for linguistics, in which practitioners learn from each other in order to anticipate challenges and be prepared to recognize and address them in ways that minimize risk. The primary components of such a micro-ethics are training courses, which, alongside conferences and workshops dedicated to ethics, are becoming a staple of a linguistics education (especially at the graduate level) in many places, and extra-curricular discussions of ethics case studies, which may take the form of games such as the Ethics dilemma (https://www.eur.nl/en/about-eur/policy-and-regulations/integrity/research-integrity/dilemma-game) or of personal accounts anonymously presented online (e.g., the case studies compiled by the Committee On Publication

Ethics, https://publicationethics.org/guidance) or during in-person departmental-level events (Dobrin 2025).

As guiding principles of such a micro-ethics, one might cite: (1) empathy and reflexivity (putting ourselves in others' shoes, anticipating how what we say will sound to those outside our field and adjusting our terms and actions accordingly); (2) solution pluralism (acknowledging that multiple ways of solving a problem may be valid);[11] (3) intellectual humility vis-à-vis all three constituencies we interact with (our participants, our colleagues and students, our sponsors and society at large), and (4) differentiated responsibility (realizing that we uphold different responsibilities toward each of these constituencies and that sometimes these responsibilities may clash). With these, and similar, principles, the goal of micro-ethics is not to regulate but rather to help us recognize and provide guidance when navigating often thorny ethical terrains that tend to fall through the cracks of regulatory oversight.

Take the process of obtaining participants' informed consent, in which participants are given information about procedures and risks and autonomy regarding their participation in the research. The goal of this process is to reduce the unequal power relationship between researcher and researched by making the research a shared project (akin to a 'contract'), in which both sides have rights and obligations toward each other. A seldom acknowledged problematic aspect interfering with this process is datafication, meaning the executive decision that turns aspects of reality into data to be collected, traded, and so on (Cukier and Mayer-Schönberger 2013). Clearly, any time materials are collected, several aspects of reality are noted simultaneously and it is not always possible to know in advance which of these aspects will be found useful by future users of these materials. Datafication is thus an interpretative process that bears the mark of the human agents performing it. The asymmetrical decision-making in this kind of process arguably holds the greatest potential for (future) harm, also because it lies partly outside the hands of the researcher presently collecting the data. Crucially, datafication relates to *un*anticipated benefits and harms from future use of collected materials, such that these cannot be anticipatorily listed on a consent form. The researcher has a number of options in this case. They can: inform participants of the

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11 To cite just one example: when the banning of the term 'fieldwork' by one US institution prompted discussion among linguists about the exoticizing potential of this term (for the news item, see: https://www.npr.org/2023/01/14/1148470571/usc-office-removes-field-from-curriculum-racist), students in my ethics course suggested that, rather than dropping the term altogether, we could instead opt to re-appropriate it, describing as "fieldwork" all cases of data collection, including those that take place on one's university campus. This, in turn, brought up further potentially problematic labels such as data collected "in the wild" (as opposed to in controlled conditions in a lab), which bear similar exoticizing potential, and for which multiple suggestions were heard. What was gained from these discussions was, above all, an increased awareness of the implicit evaluative potential of terms, calling for each researcher to make their own, informed choices on a case by case basis.

possibility of datafication, essentially sharing this responsibility with them; strictly control who has access to the collected materials (this may, however, need to be negotiated against the wish to uphold the FAIR principles; Wilkinson et al. 2016); or, commit to destroying materials after a period of time (which is also at odds with the FAIR principles and can be especially counter-productive for linguistic research, see Section 3 above). Which of these options to cite on a consent form and how should also be balanced against the wish to unduly burden participants or, worse, scare them off participating altogether.

Still, in our attempts to empower participants as equal co-producers of knowledge, is it also possible to go too far? If we include participants in research agenda-setting, how constrained should we be by their own agendas and what research outcomes *they* would like to see? Should we, for instance, refrain from studying topics they may not want studied? Should we refrain from reporting results undesirable to them or that cast them in a negative light? The power dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship discussed by Atkins et al. (2025) highlight the fact that this relationship is (also) a human relationship and that, like any other human relationship, it is important to set boundaries. Further, what are our responsibilities toward unlikeable participants (e.g., sexist or those espousing Nazi ideologies)? While the principle of minimizing risk still applies (we are linguists, not judges, after all), which entails protecting their privacy, when, how, and to what extent do we implement this? And what about potential risks to ourselves (the researcher)? Researcher well-being is an increasing focus of attention and recent years have seen a rise in reports of mental health issues at work (Foulkes and Andrews 2023). Academics, in particular "rank among those with the highest levels of common mental disorders: the prevalence of common psychological disorders is estimated to be between 32 % and 42 % among academic employees and postgraduate students, compared to approximately 19 % in the general population" (Kismihók et al. 2021: 2, emphasis added). Doxing (exposing personal or sensitive information about targeted individuals) and personal threats are only two of the most common hazards, which include also other types of mental health hazards that can follow from engaging in linguistic research (e.g., when students are asked to transcribe data from emergency calls recorded during incidents of abuse). While some of these issues have been addressed in published research (e.g., Rüdiger and Dayter 2017), others (e.g., how constrained we should be by participant agendas) hardly ever are (but see Atkins et al. 2025; Schifano et al. 2025).

The sharing of research results once the research has been completed and issues of giving back represent a whole other Pandora's box just waiting to be opened. Some communities take a special interest in this and invite researchers back to share their results, acknowledging that research results can help raise the profile of, e.g., endangered language varieties in the eyes of the authorities, and a researcher's interest

in a community's ways of speaking can reignite the community's own interest in its maintenance (e.g., Schifano et al. 2025). But can this also be undesirable? What if the language is persecuted? Does the goal of documenting it override potential harm to individual participants? While the answer to this question, from the point of view of minimizing risk, may seem easy[12] – a resounding "no" – what if the variety is not formally persecuted but rather heavily stigmatized such that participants feel that any knowledge of it will hold them (or, more commonly, their children) back? To what extent should linguists try or hope to reverse this situation, which would also allow them to go ahead with the research at hand? An all too common scenario in language revitalization efforts, the answer may vary from case to case; sometimes, prioritizing the benefit of the participants may mean letting go of the research altogether (this is one way of answering the question regarding collaborative agenda-setting posed above). Issues of giving back, on the other hand, whether in the form of monetary or in-kind returns, can also raise ethical conundrums. Meeting community needs in material ways (e.g., by providing equipment, creating educational materials, or helping to preserve collections of cultural records locally, see, e.g., Thieberger 2020) is probably the least problematic way of doing this; however, this can necessitate institutional support and resources that are beyond the reach of individual researchers. The more feasible alternative of monetary compensation, on the other hand, also needs to be realized in ways that are culturally appropriate (so as to valorize participant labour) yet long-sighted (if compensation is too much, the next researcher may not be able to match it). In view of these complexities, it has been proposed that plans for giving back should be made explicit in funding applications (Sarvasy 2025) – a suggestion which makes sense, seeing as these are some of the most concrete and direct ways in which the benefits of research stand to be experienced by the participants themselves (recall Labov's second ethical principle of debt incurred, cited in Section 2 above).

5 This issue

The eight contributions to this special issue cover many, though not all, of the issues raised above.[13] Giving priority to the specific challenges that can arise in linguistics

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12 Although note the clash here between our responsibility to participants (which requires us not to document the variety) and our responsibility to society and posterity (which would require us to do so).
13 Among the issues not presently covered are issues of workplace ethics, including researcher well-being, and publication abuses, including (self-) plagiarism, co-authorship issues, salami publishing, and so on. This is not because they are any less important but because these issues arguably also affect other fields and are, in this sense, not specifically a linguistic concern (though some of their manifestations might be).

research, the first three articles approach these from three rather different per-spectives: that of formal linguistic research, of participant-centred linguistic research, and of linguistic research using pre-existing digital data. By highlighting the ethical dimensions of each of these, this trio of articles illustrate the point made earlier that ethics is not a niche concern of just some branches of linguistics but rather shared across the field. Moreover, by showing that ethical questions can arise not just during the planning stages, where they can be addressed macro-ethically, but throughout and even after a project has been completed, they underline the need to cultivate an 'ethical mindset', whereby researchers are trained to make and justify their own micro-ethical decisions in a self-reflective way.

In "Ethical concerns for theoretical research in linguistics: issues and best practices", Chandra, D'Alessandro, and Putnam consider ethical dimensions of formal (specifically generative) linguistics and show that, despite a possible perception that ethical considerations are irrelevant to this type of work due to its focus on grammars rather than speakers, ethical concerns arise here as well. Focusing on two of these, the labelling of language varieties and speakers' attitudes to the varieties they speak (see also Armostis 2025), the authors draw on their own work with Italo-Romance varieties, Hindi/Urdu, and Heritage Germanic in the US to un-pack some of the complex decision-making linguists, sometimes all too routinely, engage in. Drawing attention to the ethical repercussions of these choices, the authors call for increased awareness and self-reflection, which apply to linguists no matter what their approach to theory.

Moving away from grammar-building as the goal, the next three authors, Atkins, Mackenzie, and Jones, introduce the term "participant-centred linguistic research" to refer to the "close engagement with participants, beyond collecting data produced 'by' and 'about' them" prioritized in approaches such as linguistic ethnography and anthropology. In "Ethical practice in participant-centred linguistic research", they draw on their interactions with three different populations (medical professionals, members of an online community, and youth LGBTQ+ groups) to illustrate the complex relational issues that can arise in this type of work and the continued negotiation of rights and obligations between parties that these issues call for. Combining these experiences, they propose four micro-ethical principles, two concerning consent and confidentiality, and two covering roles, relationships, and power dynamics, that emphasize the dialogic and dynamic nature of these processes.

In the third article, "Ethical challenges in collecting pre-existing digital data for linguistic research", Dalmaijer, Stommel, Pas, and Spooren tackle the thorny issue of using already available digital data for one's research purposes, documenting several of the ethical pitfalls that can arise even when – or rather, precisely because – the researcher has not been involved in collecting the data in the first place. Drawing attention to what they call the "non-observer's paradox" (the fact that not being able to observe the data prior to collection blinds the researcher to possible ethical

considerations raised by these data), they – like the authors of the first two articles – highlight the importance of monitoring one's research processes beyond macro-ethical compliance to ensure the overarching goal of minimizing risk. Another important dimension that this article (and, in part, the previous one) serves to highlight comprises the complexities of interdisciplinary work, where the ethics requirements of different fields may at times be at odds with each other, requiring, once more, on-the-spot, customized solutions. Dalmaijer and colleagues emphasize the role of technology in both enabling and constraining such solutions.

Staying with the theme of collaborating with stakeholders outside linguistics, the next two articles shift the focus to collaborating with communities, and how the interests, needs, and priorities of non-academic stakeholders can be taken into consideration. More than just an ethical desideratum, this is necessary to help foster the trust needed for longitudinal research in a community setting. As such, it generates responsibilities not only to participants but also to future generations of researchers in the field. In "Ethical considerations and good practices in linguistic work on endangered languages: the case of a research programme on Cypriot Arabic", Armostis describes the ethics tensions that can arise during the various stages of documentation and revitalization of an endangered minority language and how these can be resolved through close consultation with community members, whose opinions may sometimes be given priority. Respecting the emic viewpoints of the users and bringing in experts from neighbouring fields (education, software development, etc.) are ways of practising intellectual humility which ultimately benefit the goals of the project itself.

The next article, by Schifano, Allen, Nellan, Restrepo Garcés, and Kasstan, provides a useful counterpoint on working with communities by offering a rare insight into the perspective of community members themselves: what reasons and expectations do *they* have for and from engaging in such projects? A first observation is that community members are not reluctant and passive participants in this type of research. Indeed, they might actively seek out such collaborations as a way of advancing their own advocacy goals. While not the focus of Schifano et al.'s contribution, this generates, of course, a different kind of ethical challenge for a linguist. To the extent that the community's goals align with (or at least are not opposed to) those of the linguist, such "alliances" (always entered into with cognisance) are not necessarily bad. More often than not, however, communities feel that decision-making is disproportionately practised by the academics, who do not always include (a sufficient number of, or those considered ratified) community members in designing their studies. As a result, and despite progress in this regard, projects can still have an extractive flavour, which can sour the collaboration and undercut possibilities for future collaborative work. Researchers' ways of seeking an entry into a community are central to this: internal community dynamics play out in

the selection of partners, with repercussions for the engagement of community members and the quality of outcomes. To improve this situation, the authors make a number of concrete recommendations that aim to place communities and academics on an equal footing under a broader protocol regulating ethical collaborative research design and implementation.

This macro-ethical note is picked up by the next contribution, which continues on the theme of working with communities, this time from the perspective of giving back. In "Ethical budgets in (psycho-)linguistic fieldwork", Sarvasy shifts the focus to psycholinguistic fieldwork, which is different from the kind of long-term descriptive fieldwork dealt with in the last two articles because of its short-term, impersonal, and transactional character. Psycholinguists, whether in or outside the lab, typically run experiments which call on participants to carry out predefined tasks, in the design and implementation of which community members are hardly ever consulted in advance. Under these circumstances, avoiding a sense of extractive exploitation and implementing principles of reciprocity can be hard. After introducing the TRUST Code for Equitable Research Partnerships, which regulates short-term cross-cultural research, Sarvasy takes up the thorny issue of what share of allocated budgets goes directly back to the communities that make this research possible in the first place and argues for increased regulatory oversight in this regard. Sarvasy, in effect, argues for an intervention at the macro-ethical level: since budgets are drawn up and approved at the institutional level, this is not something that should be left up to individual researchers. Instead, fair budgets should be used as a criterion for competitive project selection, in order to push for the benefits of research, including local capacity-building for running psycholinguistic research, to be more equitably distributed among those who make it possible.

Regulatory oversight is also the solution called for by the next article on "The role of environmental ethics and sustainability in research ethics for linguistics" by Eisenbeiss, Torregrossa, and Hopper. Here, the authors address a facet of linguistic research that hardly ever surfaces in discussions about ethics, namely the environmental impact of our work, reminding us that this is also an aspect of our social responsibility as linguists. Outlining a multitude of ways in which linguistic research (from data collection to processing and results dissemination) has consequences for our physical environment, they make a wealth of practical recommendations for how we may keep these consequences to a minimum, focusing on energy consumption and sustainable travel. While these issues are shared across academic fields – or rather, precisely because of that – they can only be effectively handled by the concerted efforts of institutions and professional organizations. Including environmental issues in disciplinary guidelines can thus help increase their visibility and put them on the agenda.

A shared insight of the articles discussed so far is that ethics is a dynamic and multi-faceted process requiring creative solutions to sometimes well-known

problems. This raises the question of how we can best prepare students to develop the kind of an 'ethics instinct' that will guide them to the best decisions in this regard. In the closing contribution, "Training for ethical linguistics: a model for building "Responsible Conduct of Research" into department culture", Dobrin takes up this question and advocates for a model of ethics training known as Responsible Conduct of Research. The main components of this model are regularly held seminars, organized at the departmental (or other appropriate local professional community) level, in which fellow linguists share ethical dilemmas encountered in their work, as a way of generating reflection about ethics in a safe environment. Emphasizing the role of emotion in generating behavioural change, Dobrin argues that this kind of learning 'by proxy' (through others' experiences) can lead to the necessary paradigm shift from compliance ethics to an ethical sensitivity which should become part and parcel of belonging to our linguistic community of practice.

By drawing on the personal experiences of contributors based in different institutions and countries, the articles in this special issue provide a fairly broad overview of ethics practices and concerns in different localities (though not globally, as we had originally hoped), showing, as one student in my ethics course put it, how much more there is to this topic "beyond its stilted conception as box-ticking". This is also why we chose to publish this content in a journal that follows the Diamond Open Access publication model, making it publicly available at no cost to authors and freely available to readers. A final word of thanks is due to all the anonymous reviewers, who, by making time in their agendas to review about a topic sometimes considered peripheral to "primary research", testify to its importance. It is my hope, and that of the contributors, that this special issue will serve to energize ethical thinking and, very concretely, that readers will find here ideas relevant to their own work.

Appendix

Linguistics guidelines by professional organizations and other groups (selection)

Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/ last updated
American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL). Ethics Guidelines	Applied linguistics, graduate students, emerging scholars	https://assets.noviams.com/ novi-file-uploads/aaal/PDFs/ AAAL_Ethics_Guidelines_-_App- a11b0518.pdf	The American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) Ethics Guidelines are intended as a frame of reference endorsed by AAAL to guide ethical practice toward and among graduate students as they prepare for profes- sional and academic careers. Building on BAAL's 2016 Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics report and while also acknowledging that undergraduate students conduct research, we focus specifically on graduate students (emerging scholars), who inhabit an acutely vulnerable space because they are often faced with challenges and con- straints in the multiple, and some- times competing, roles of students, teachers, assistants, and researchers. In addition, we must recognize that graduate students have many insights to share, have a stake in the wellbeing of their academic institutions and the field more broadly, and bring a fresh, often critical, perspective to the work of more seasoned applied linguists.	2018

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/ last updated
British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL). Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics	Applied linguistics	https://www.baal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BAAL-Good-Practice-Guidelines-2021.pdf	The document is not designed as a set of criteria for professional accreditation in applied linguistics and does not aim to exhaust the discussion around these issues, but it provides points for reflection and engagement with several aspects of professional practice. In a changing climate of teaching and research, its suggestions are intended to help applied linguists to maintain high standards and to respond flexibly to new opportunities. Most of this document is organised around the different work relationships and responsibilities with which applied linguists engage, including informants (2.), the researchers themselves (3.), academic colleagues (4.), students (5.), and applied linguistics as a field (6.). Section 7. offers some reflections on research conducted in collaboration with external organisations and groups, followed by responsibilities to our own	2021 (4th edition)

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/ last updated
			institutions (8.) and the public more broadly (9.).	
Linguistic Society of America. Code of Ethics for Linguists in Forensic Linguistics Consulting	Forensic linguistics	https://lsaethics.wordpress. com/category/forensic-linguistics-ethics-statement/	The following principles of ethical conduct are intended to guide those members of the Linguistic Society of America who engage in forensic linguistic research and legal consulting and testimony; other scholarly and professional associations (for example, the International Association of Forensic Linguists) may have additional ethical codes that members of those organizations should also consult.	2011
Linguistic Society of America. Guidelines on Ethics for Publications and Conferences of the Linguistic Society of America	Publications and conferences	https://www.lsadc.org/ guidelines_on_ethics_for_lsa_ publications_and_conferences	Because research results presented in LSA publications and conferences are meant to advance the scientific study of language and may also serve to inform government policy decisions and educate students, the Society needs to maintain a high level of quality and integrity in its reviewing and editorial procedures. The responsibility for this rests with all those	2015

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/last updated
			involved, including authors, reviewers, editors, members of oversight committees, and editorial staff. Adherence to the guidelines in this document should promote fair treatment throughout the processes of peer review and editorial decision, for all items under consideration for inclusion in a publication or conference of the Society.	
Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR). Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0	Internet research, data, informed consent	https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf	While driven by ongoing changes and developments in the technological, legal, and ethical contexts that shape internet research, IRE 1.0 and 2.0 ground a basic ethical approach that continues as foundational for IRE 3.0. IRE 3.0 is then illustrated by way of two elements – namely, (greater) attention to stages of research (a continuation of distinctions developed in 1.0 and 2.0) and what has become a standard problem of informed consent is particularly (but not exclusively) Big Data research	2020

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/ last updated
			approaches. We then list and briefly discuss the primary additional ethical challenges in IRE 3.0 as identified by the AoIR Ethics Working Group (EWG). We offer a general structure for ethical analysis, designed to help identify the ethically-relevant issues and questions, along with additional suggestions for how to begin to analyse and address these challenges in more detail. We offer this general structure as a guide for developing more extensive analyses of specific issues, both current and future. Initial examples of what such analyses can look like are offered here in 6. Companion Resources: Topical Guidelines and Ethical Frameworks. We hope that additional analyses will be developed in response to emerging specific and ongoing socio-technical developments. In this way, we hope to produce a "living document," i.e., a	

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/ last updated
Linguistic Society of America (LSA). Ethics Statement	Ethical choices in professional, supervisory, teaching, research	https://www.lsadc.org/lsa_ethics_statement	This statement sets forth a basic ethical framework and governing ethical principles for the discipline of linguistics and its subdisciplines. It is the responsibility of linguists, individually and collectively, to hold ourselves to the highest ethical standards, anticipate ethical dilemmas, avoid bringing harm to those with whom we work and actively strive to ensure that our work benefits others. The framework and principles outlined in this document are intentionally written to provide linguists with guidance for making ethical choices in professional, supervisory, teaching, research, and other contexts. This statement is not meant to replace formal research ethics oversight, nor is it meant to provide an exhaustive code of conduct. It is intended to serve as a resource for	2019

set of guidelines that will continue to develop and unfold.

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/last updated
			holding ourselves accountable to a core set of principles and for demonstrating to students, review bodies, funding agencies, research participants, and others the professional commitment on the part of linguists and of linguistics as a discipline to carrying out all aspects of our work in an ethical manner.	
Linguistics Data Interest Group. The Austin Principles of Data Citation in Linguistics	Data citation	https://site.uit.no/linguisticsdatacitation/austinprinciples.	The Austin Principles of Data Citation in Linguistics cover the purpose, function and attributes of citations. These principles recognize the dual necessity of creating citation practices that are both human understandable and machine-actionable. They are not comprehensive recommendations for data stewardship. And, as practices vary across communities and technologies will evolve, we do not include recommendations for specific implementations, but encourage communities to develop practices and tools that embody these principles.	2018

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/ last updated
Communication of Rights Group. Guidelines for Communicating Rights to Non-native Speakers of English in Australia, England and Wales, and the USA	Non-native speakers, law, linguistics	https://www.baal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Communication_of_Rights_Octo.pdf	The purpose of these guidelines, prepared by linguistic and legal experts from Australia, England and Wales, and the United States, is to articulate recommendations in terms of (a) wording of the rights/cautions (Part A) and (b) communication of the rights/cautions to non-native speakers of English (Part B). These recommendations are grounded in linguistic and psychological research on the comprehension of rights (listed in Appendix) and in our collective experience of working with cases involving the understanding of rights by non-native speakers of English. Our focus is on the right to silence, as this is the only right shared across jurisdictions in our respective countries, but the same principles apply to the communication of other rights. We recognize that some of the recommendations below apply to all suspects, not only those who do not	

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/ last updated
			speak English as their main language. However, the focus of this document is on non-native speakers of English. We also recognize that non-native speakers of English experience difficulties in invoking their rights but this issue is beyond the scope of this document.	
British Association of Applied Linguistics. Guidelines for the Use of Language Analysis in Relation to Questions of National Origin in Refugee Cases	Refugees, sociolinguistics, language profiling	https://www.baal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/refugeeguide.pdf	We, the undersigned linguists, recognize that there is often a connection between the way that people speak and their national origin. We also recognize the difficulties faced by governments in deciding eligibility for refugee status of the increasing numbers of asylum seekers who arrive without documents. The following guidelines are therefore intended to assist governments in assessing the general validity of language analysis in the determination of national origin, nationality or citizenship. We have attempted to avoid linguistic terminology. Where technical terms are	2004

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/last updated
			required, they are explained (e.g. 'socialization' in Guideline 2, and 'code-switching' in Guideline 9c). The term 'language variety' which is used in several guidelines, refers generally to a language or a dialect.	
ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language. Indigenous Linguistic and Cultural Heritage Ethics Document	Indigenous peoples, cultural property	Thieberger & Jones (2017)	The Centre recognises the right of indigenous communities and individuals to maintain, control, protect and develop their traditional knowledge and cultural expressions, and the inherent ownership they have over this intellectual property. The Centre also recognises that communities and individuals within the region hold different views as to what these rights entail. Research conducted by Centre staff and students at the collaborating institutions is subject to approval by the respective institutional human research ethics committees.	2021

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Full name	Field	Link	Introduction	Created/ last updated
Data Citation Synthesis Group. Joint Declaration of Data Citation Principles	Data citation	https://www.force11.org/group/ joint-declaration-data-citation-principles-final	Sound, reproducible scholarship rests upon a foundation of robust, accessible data. For this to be so in practice as well as theory, data must be accorded due importance in the practice of scholarship and in the enduring scholarly record. In other words, data should be considered legitimate, citable products of research. Data citation, like the citation of other evidence and sources, is good research practice and is part of the scholarly ecosystem supporting data reuse. In support of this assertion, and to encourage good practise, we offer a set of guiding principles for data within scholarly literature, another dataset, or any other research object. These principles are the synthesis of work by several groups. As we move into the next phase, we welcome your participation and endorsement of these principles.	2014

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