

# Where does academic authority come from?

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By Ingrid Piller | December 16, 2019 | Mentoring

The following is a summary of my recent article “[On the conditions of authority in academic publics](#)” in 14 tweets. The paper was published in the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*; an open-access pre-print version is available [here](#).



**Language on the Move** @Lg\_on\_the\_Move · Dec 16, 2019



\*\*\*On the conditions of authority in academic publics\*\*\*

This thread 🗎 summarizes recent article by Ingrid Piller in *Journal of Sociolinguistics* for the busy reader #research #AcademicTwitter

Journal of Sociolinguistics

THEME ISSUE ARTICLE

**On the conditions of authority in academic publics**

Ingrid Piller ✉

First published: 15 November 2019 | <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12393>

[Read the full text >](#)

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Abstract

EN ZH

The discourse of some of the most powerful public figures in today's world is often incoherent and nonsensical. Incoherent yet authoritative discourse shows that authority does not rest in language but results from non-linguistic and pre-textual conditions. The non-linguistic and pre-textual conditions are exemplified in an Australian case-study of a media debate between the Immigration Minister and a refugee, drawing on research by Smith-Khan (2019a, 2019b). Two such conditions are then examined with reference to academic publics. First, I ask which languages do or do not carry authority, before moving on to speaker identity as a condition of authority. The close association between English and academic excellence has resulted in diminishing the authority of academic publications in languages other than English. The same is true of publications by women and people of colour. I close by reflecting on referencing practices as forms of extending authoritativeness to voices in excluded languages and from excluded scholars in academic publics.



**Language on the Move**

@Lg\_on\_the\_Move

Q: What makes a #text credible, trustworthy and authoritative?

Many people think it's the quality of #discourse: that some ways of using #language make text more believable


Certainly true BUT: world leaders may talk complete nonsense and still command authority and get elected



Donald J. Trump

do you think people should be concerned that the president posted an incoherent tweet last night, and that it then stayed up for hou

stary): Uh, no.

 @realDonaldTrump

Despite the constant r  
covfefe

2017-05-31, 12:06 AM

Why did it stay up so long? Is no one watching this?  
story): No, I think the president and a small group of people ki  
what he meant.  
speaking all at once]  
What does covfefe mean?  
What does it mean?  
What does the president mean?  
What is covfefe? (Quoted from LaFrance, 2019)

5 10:42 AM - Dec 16, 2019

[See Language on the Move's other Tweets](#)



**Language on the Move** @Lg\_on\_the\_Move · Dec 16, 2019



Replying to @Lg\_on\_the\_Move

That is because "[#authority](#) comes to [#language](#) from outside"  
(Bourdieu, 1991, p. 109)



**Language on the Move**

@Lg\_on\_the\_Move

Some of the pre-textual resources that give [#authority](#) to  
[#discourse](#) are listed by Smith-Khan (2019)

1. Linguistic capital
2. Material resources

## 3. Identity privilege

4. Platform privilege [cambridge.org/core/journals/...](https://cambridge.org/core/journals/)

Language in Society

Article Metrics

Volume 48, Issue 3 June 2019, pp. 403-427

### Communicative resources and credibility in public discourse on refugees

Laura Smith-Khan <sup>(a1)</sup>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404519000186> Published online by Cambridge University Press: 23 April 2019

**Abstract** This article examines how communicative resources affect the construction of credible texts and identities in a public debate on Australia's treatment of a refugee. It centres on two key written statements—one from the Immigration Minister, and another from a Somali refugee. The analysis is divided into four levels, exploring the parties' respective linguistic, material, identity, and platform resources, and how these impact their statements' creation and reception, and their participation in discourse creation more generally. The article finds that there are inequalities on all four resource levels that largely undermine the refugee's ability to present a credible text and identity and challenge mainstream discourse on refugees. The article demonstrates how a multi-level analysis of communicative resources can challenge assumptions about participation and uncover inequalities invisible in the prevailing discourse. (Asylum, Australia, communicative resources, discourse, intercultural communication, media, power, refugee)\*

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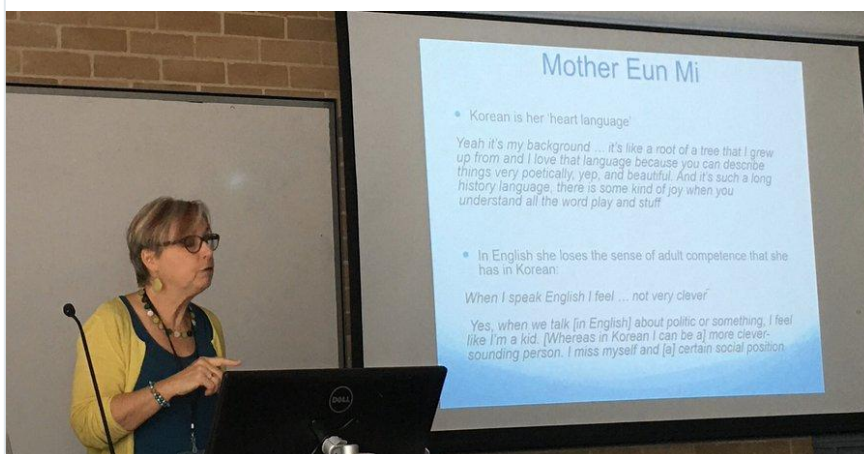


Replying to @Lg\_on\_the\_Move

1. Linguistic capital: people tend to consider someone who uses standard #English with a so-called "native" #accent as more authoritative than someone who struggles with #language #proficiencytwitter.com/Lg\_on\_the\_Move...

**Language on the Move** @Lg\_on\_the\_Move

"When I speak English I feel ... not very clever." The experience of every additional #language speaker 🙄 presentation by Liz Ellis @ALS2019Conf #AusLingSoc2019

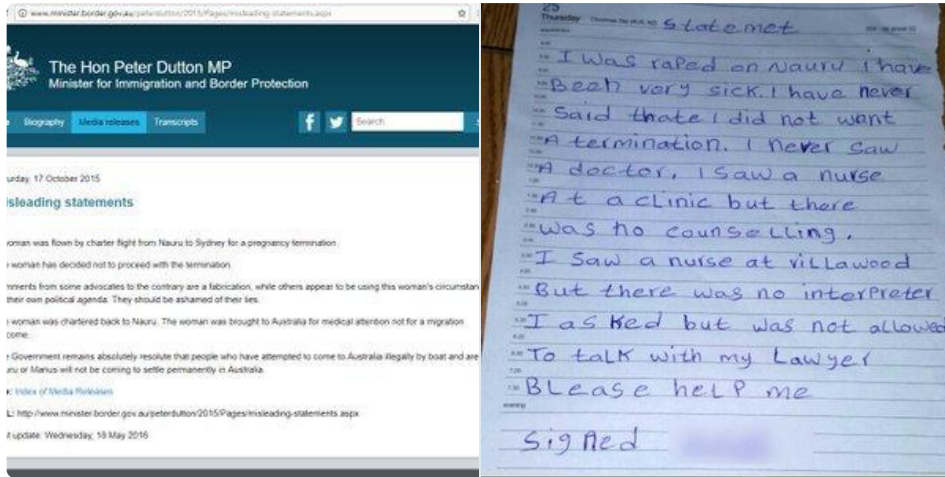


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2. Material resources: if you bring your text to market on a well-designed website with stable URL, it is accorded greater #credibility than a handwritten note on a torn piece of paper

(Examples from Smith-Khan, 2019)



4 10:42 AM - Dec 16, 2019 ⓘ

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**Language on the Move** @Lg\_on\_the\_Move · Dec 16, 2019  
 Replying to @Lg\_on\_the\_Move  
 3. Identity privilege: it's the 21st century and stale pale males are still in charge ...#authority  
 =#race #gender #age #able

**Language on the Move** @Lg\_on\_the\_Move  
 4. Platform privilege: look no further than #Twitter: number of followers and retweets are widely considered markers of #authority  
 ...

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**Language on the Move** @Lg\_on\_the\_Move · Dec 16, 2019  
 Replying to @Lg\_on\_the\_Move  
 Do #linguistic capital, material resources, #identity #privilege, and platform privilege make a difference to the #authority of #research, too?

Absolutely! Research published in #English and by #white #men commands the greatest authority, as Piller (2019) shows





**Language on the Move**

@Lg\_on\_the\_Move

Citation rates serve as a measure of [#academic](#) [#authority](#)

Irrespective how groundbreaking and innovative the [#research](#), publications in [#languages](#) other than [#English](#) attract few citations [#English](#) = [#authority](#)

(research)[languageonthemove.com/academic-capit...](https://languageonthemove.com/academic-capit...)

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Replying to @Lg\_on\_the\_Move

Female academics publish higher-quality papers and get cited less because we all collude to accord [#authority](#) to male [#researchers](#) (@erinhengel) [#gender](#) [#research](#) [#AcademicTwitter](#)  
[languageonthemove.com/20818-2/](https://languageonthemove.com/20818-2/)

**Why do female academics publish less than their male peer...**

Tomorrow is International Women's Day and we will therefore look at the gender productivity gap in academia. Female researchers  
[languageonthemove.com](https://languageonthemove.com)



**Language on the Move**

@Lg\_on\_the\_Move

Same is true of [#white](#) scholars: they are more likely to be cited and accorded [#authority](#)[#race](#) [#research](#) [#AcademicTwitter](#)  
[languageonthemove.com/why-are-you-no...](https://languageonthemove.com/why-are-you-no...)

**Why are you not citing any African female expert? - Language on...**

Minority language maintenance and revitalization is a sub-discipline of sociolinguistics that I mostly stay away from. My discomfort with most of  
[languageonthemove.com](https://languageonthemove.com)

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Replying to @Lg\_on\_the\_Move

What can we do to tackle [#inequality](#) in the way [#research](#) is accorded [#respect](#)?

Remember that every [#literature](#) review, every [#reference](#), every [#citation](#) accords or withholds [#authority](#)

Make them count![#AcademicTwitter](#)

PILLER

WILEY | 527

## 5 | CAN EXCLUDED LANGUAGES AND SCHOLARS GAIN AUTHORITY?

Twenty-first century publics have undoubtedly become more diverse. However, the conditions under which traditionally underrepresented voices have entered public spaces mean that they have to work much harder to make an impress. To speak incoherently and still command authority is a privilege that traditionally underrepresented people can only dream of (Younge, 2018). A comparison between the current gaffe-prone incumbent of the US presidency, with whom I started this text, and his predecessor, President Barack Obama, the first black man to ever hold that office, illustrates the point: President Obama was an exceptionally accomplished politician and orator (Alim & Smitherman, 2012).

That newcomers to the publics have to work harder to gain authority is true not only in politics but also in academia. Evidence comes from research with successful female economics scholars, who have been found to write much more readable prose, measured by automated readability measures, than their male peers (Hengel, 2017). This researcher shows that female-authored papers in top-ranking economics journals are better written than male-authored papers. The gap is particularly stark when it comes to senior academics: female economists write increasingly clearly over the course of their career while the writing of their male peers does not perceptibly improve.



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"When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are [#free](#), you need to free somebody else. If you have some [#power](#), then your job is to [#empower](#) somebody else." (Toni Morrison)[#academia](#) [#research](#)

♡ 22 10:43 AM - Dec 16, 2019



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**Language on the Move** @Lg\_on\_the\_Move · Dec 16, 2019



Replying to @Lg\_on\_the\_Move

Reference:

Piller, I. (2019). On the conditions of authority in academic publics. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 23(5), 521-528 [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jo...](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jo...)

Open access preprint: [languageonthemove.com/wp-content/upl...](https://languageonthemove.com/wp-content/upl...)

## Journal of Sociolinguistics

THEME ISSUE ARTICLE

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#### Abstract

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The discourse of some of the most powerful public figures in today's world is often incoherent and nonsensical. Incoherent yet authoritative discourse shows that authority does not rest in language but results from non-linguistic and pre-textual conditions. The non-linguistic and pre-textual conditions are exemplified in an Australian case-study of a media debate between the Immigration Minister and a refugee, drawing on research by Smith-Khan (2019a, 2019b). Two such conditions are then examined with reference to academic publics. First, I ask which languages do or do not carry authority, before moving on to speaker identity as a condition of authority. The close association between English and academic excellence has resulted in diminishing the authority of academic publications in languages other than English. The same is true of publications by women and people of colour. I close by reflecting on referencing practices as forms of extending authoritativeness to voices in excluded languages and from excluded scholars in academic publics.



**Language on the Move**

@Lg\_on\_the\_Move

Special thanks to @fonolog @Neerlandistiek, who blogged this paper almost immediately when it was published.

What a generous #authority boost! 🙏 Hartelijk bedankt! [neerlandistiek.nl/2019/11/taal-k...](https://neerlandistiek.nl/2019/11/taal-k...)

#### Taal krijgt zijn autoriteit van buiten

Het komt slechts zijdelings aan de orde in het artikel dat de Australische taalkundige Ingrid Piller schreef voor het *Journal of Sociolinguistics*: het failliet van de

neerlandistiek.nl

♥ 10 10:43 AM - Dec 16, 2019



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