

## PLM 2026 Plenary Talk

### **From Difference to Resource: Navigating Under-Explored Linguistic Landscapes for Research and Professional Practice**

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This plenary talk utilizes evidence-based resources on linguistic variation to enhance awareness and reframe approaches among language researchers, ultimately informing speech and language professionals. This is done with North America serving as an illustrative case.

North America is characterized by extraordinary linguistic diversity, shaped by Indigenous presence, historically forced and voluntary migration, language contact, and ongoing societal evolution. Yet professional practices in speech-language pathology, education, and related professions have often been grounded in standard-language-centered approaches. This plenary invites us to reconsider these issues and to recognize linguistic variation as a fundamental feature of human communication rather than a deviation from it.

Across the continent, speakers use a wide range of English varieties, Indigenous languages, heritage languages, and multilingual repertoires. These linguistic systems are structured, systematic, and socially meaningful. However, when they are viewed through the lenses of standard language frameworks that fail to account for the inherent variation of language use, speakers, especially children, are placed at risk for inappropriate evaluations, assessments, interventions, and linguistic marginalization.

This talk highlights three central themes. First, linguistic variation is not disorder. Differences associated with dialect, multilingualism, or language contact reflect linguistic knowledge shaped by history, community, and identity. Second, context matters. Accurate assessment and effective intervention require attention to sociolinguistic environments, input patterns, language ideologies, and community norms, and the role of linguistic ecologies. Third, equity in professional practice demands collaboration. Meaningful progress depends on partnerships with communities, respect for Indigenous and heritage knowledge systems, and the utilization of tools and practices that are both linguistically informed and culturally responsive.

Importantly, linguistic systems are not static. New varieties continue to emerge, and existing ones evolve in response to demographic and social change. Professionals need to be prepared to work within this dynamic landscape, drawing on research that integrates linguistic evidence and theory, clinical expertise and receptiveness, educational strategies, and community perspectives.

In closing, embracing linguistic diversity is both a scientific imperative and an ethical responsibility for both researchers and practitioners. When professionals move beyond deficit-based models and recognize variation as linguistic richness, which ultimately becomes a linguistic and cultural resource, they contribute to more sensitive and more targeted assessments and diagnoses, more effective clinical and educational service provision, resulting in improved evidence-based decision-making and more righteous representation of the communities served.