Exploring Narratives and Concerns: Applied Linguistics in Homelessness Research

Identifying voices

Understanding and addressing problematic narratives surrounding homelessness is one of the primary objectives of the Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative. In order to have an impact in this area, it is necessary to first identify the concerns and views of different stakeholders, along with the language and underlying beliefs that create and promote negative stereotypes about community members who lack permanent housing. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand how language is spread and shared across different social layers and to identify what is being focused on and what is being ignored in conversations about homelessness and housing. We began to do this by mapping out different stakeholders and identifying texts such as social media posts, policy documents, and local news articles which reflect the language used by various groups to discuss and promote their concerns and beliefs about homelessness along with their ideas about causes and potential solutions.

Initial Findings

One way to better understand the overall patterns and trends in the language used by different groups is through a method of linguistic analysis known as corpus linguistics. This technique involves collecting a sample of texts and using software to identify trends such as frequently used words, phrases, and grammatical patterns. We used this method to examine the language used by individuals reporting camping in public spaces and also to analyze a collection of local news articles about homelessness.

Complaints about Camping in public spaces

Portland's One Point of Contact Campsite Reporting System is an online platform which allows citizens to report the location of tents or vehicles being used for camping in public spaces. At the bottom of the form is a space for recording optional additional comments under the question, "Is there anything else we should know?" We analyzed over 11,000 of these comments which were submitted between April 1 and July 22, 2019, in order to get an understanding of the primary concerns regarding camping in public spaces, and the language being used by those choosing to report a campsite.

The most frequently mentioned issues mentioned by those filing the complaints include: drug use, blocking public sidewalks, trash, human waste, and proximity of campers to schools/playgrounds (Table 1). While the safety of property and children were often mentioned, concern for the welfare of those living in tents or vehicles was almost entirely absent from the comments (Figure 1). Extreme and derogatory language was frequently used to describe campers and terms such as *druggies*, *addicts*, *transients*, and *vagrants* were commonly used throughout the comments along with other negative verbs and adjectives, such as *squatting*, *illegal*, and *criminal* (Figure 2). Overall, those filing complaints clearly perceived the people camping in tents or cars as outsiders posing a threat to their neighborhood and regarded their presence as an indication of illicit behavior. As the city of Portland receives hundreds of these complaints every week, along with demands to remove campers and their belongings, it is clear that a significant subset of our community has little tolerance for this issue and is in need of education about the rights of those experiencing homelessness, along with a greater understanding of the causes and factors contributing to their presence in public spaces.

Reporting in Oregon Live

To begin exploring the representations of homelessness by the local media, we compiled a collection of 80 articles on this topic from the Oregon Live website, the online version of The Oregonian newspaper. These articles were written between January 2016 and June 2019. Looking at the key terms being discussed, it's clear that the population/growth of individuals experiencing homelessness and short term solutions such as shelters and tiny homes are major topics (Table 2). Homelessness is often portrayed as a crisis that needs to be addressed and ideas for solutions along with philanthropic donations to implement them are frequently discussed.

While addiction and mental health are mentioned in over half of the articles, there is relatively little mention or discussion of the systemic causes of homelessness. Racial inequality is mentioned only four times, and economic forces are mentioned in eight articles. In general, there is little discussion about why the "crisis" is occurring and why certain community members are more effected than others due to systemic inequality.

While the term *people experiencing homelessness* or *homeless population* were primarily used to reference people without permanent housing, the extreme words *transient* or *vagrant* were found in articles that reported on Fox News coverage of homelessness in the region. The lingering presence of these terms in the public discourse does little to combat negative stereotypes surrounding homelessness. Furthermore, frequent images of needles, trash, and blocked sidewalks only act to sensationalize and increase intolerance towards those sleeping in public spaces. If those writing in the media are truly interested in addressing homelessness, it's necessary for them to take responsibility for their role in shaping discourse and to take steps

toward portraying a more balanced and nuanced picture of the issues involved, particularly systemic inequalities.

Next steps in Changing the Narrative

While these initial findings reveal some of the concerns and language used to talk about homelessness, there is still much to be done in documenting and exploring narratives which are being perpetuated by different stakeholders in the community. We plan to continue to look deeply into the language used by policy makers, business owners, activists, and other media sources, along with underrepresented members in the community to learn what is shaping discussions and beliefs about homelessness, what is missing from these conversations, and what can be done to combat myths and stereotypes and build greater awareness and understanding.