PROMOTION RECOMMENDATION
The University of Michigan
College of Literature, Science, and the Arts

Natasha R. Abner, assistant professor of linguistics, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, is recommended for promotion to associate professor of linguistics, with tenure, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts.

Academic Degrees:
Ph.D.   2012   University of California, Los Angeles
B.A.   2005   University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Professional Record:
2017–present   Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics, University of Michigan
2014–2017   Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics, Montclair State University
2012–2014   Post-doctoral Scholar, Department of Psychology, University of Chicago

Summary of Evaluation:
Teaching: Professor Abner's new courses on the study of sign language, gesture, and disabilities (in particular, deafness) have substantially expanded and strengthened the Department of Linguistics curriculum. These courses, which also emphasize issues of inclusion and social justice, have been very well received by undergraduate and graduate students in linguistics and other fields. Her contributions, also including courses on introduction to linguistic analysis, linguistic theory, and generative syntax, are central to the Department of Linguistics' mission to train students in a rigorous, theory-grounded approach to the scientific study of language. Professor Abner is an innovative, enthusiastic teacher who fosters deep and engaged learning in her students. She creates collaborative, student-centered environments where students have substantial opportunities to develop as linguists and thinkers. The Sign Language and Multi-Modal Communication Lab she created is a thriving community that integrates graduate and undergraduate students, signers, and members of the deaf community as active partners and researchers.

Research: Professor Abner is an expert on the study of human language from the word level to the structure of sentences (syntax) and meaning (semantics). She has gained world recognition for her research on sign languages, which are produced by hand and facial signs/gestures and emerge primarily among deaf individuals. Professor Abner's research on the structure, cognitive properties, emergence, and development of sign languages has furthered the understanding of the role of sign and gesture in human language and communication, unveiling new evidence that language cognition is primarily modality (spoken, signed) independent. A major contribution of Abner's research is to show that signed languages develop as full-fledged natural languages in which fundamental language cognition distinctions (for instance, between nouns and verbs, or between cardinal and non-cardinal number expressions) emerge consistently in different sign language systems, including the homesign of deaf individuals who lacked exposure to sign language early in life. Her wide-reaching research contributions stand out due to their innovative results, the rigor of their theoretical underpinnings and methodological approach, and a well-motivated use of a diversity of data and experimental populations. She brings her research to bear on her teaching, in particular by articulating the systematicity, variability, and unique properties of sign languages in the context of language cognition. Her research is published in some of the most important journals in the discipline and in her sub-field. Her outstanding reputation as a researcher is also expanding into novel areas, such as her collaborative work on the comparative and historical analysis of sign languages, in which she is applying computational modeling to infer historical changes and phylogenetic relations among sign languages.

Recent and Significant Publications:

Abner, N., Namboodiripad, S., Spaepen, E., & Goldin-Meadow, S. (2022). Emergent morphology in child homesign: Evidence from number language. *Language Learning and Development*, *18*(1), 16–40.

Abner, N., Flaherty, M., Stangl, K., Brentari, D., & Goldin-Meadow, S. (2019). The noun-verb distinction in established and emergent sign systems. *Language*, *95*(2), 230–267. [Best Paper award in *Language*.]

Abner, N. (2017). What you see is what you get. get: Surface transparency and ambiguity of nominalizing reduplication in American Sign Language. *Syntax*, *20*(4), 317–352.

Abner, N. (2017). Syntactic categorization in sign languages. In H. Cohen & C. Lefebvre (Eds.), Handbook of Categorization in Cognitive Science (2nd ed., pp. 549–566). Elsevier.

Service: Professor Abner shows an extraordinary involvement with service on campus, in the profession and in the community. Her impressive service and leadership contributions, in great part in support of disabled and marginalized members of different communities, have received substantial recognition within and outside the university. She is a highly active reviewer for grants, journals, conferences, and edited volumes. She has served on a broad range of department committees and is part of a group of faculty who are leading toward a broader engagement with issues of language equity and justice.

External Reviewers:

Reviewer (A): "The connection with the local Deaf community through the Sign Language & Multi-Modal Communication Lab that [Professor Abner] founded ensures a constant knowledge sharing that will inform community leaders and policy makers in a bottom-up fashion, hence providing more access to sign language, fostering bilingual educational programs and enabling language justice in the medium and long term perspectives."

Reviewer (B): "In addition to producing a large number of high-quality research studies, [Professor Abner] has also contributed a lot to the various communities she works with. [She] considers contributing to the deaf community, and to accessibility and justice more generally, a very important mission in her academic life. I am truly impressed by the amount of effort and dedication that she brings to this mission, and especially when this is considered against the backdrop of her high quality and prolific research output. While I was not asked to comment on [Professor Abner's] teaching, I wanted to mention that I was also very impressed by her deep reflection on teaching, and by her dedication to students' learning and well-being."

Reviewer (C): "The second track is Dr. Abner's work on comparative and historical analysis of sign languages. Working with a large team, Dr. Abner has been able to apply computationally-based procedures to compare lexical items across sign languages and infer language family structures and regular historical changes. I have seen several presentations about this work and I find it very exciting and promising. The [manuscript] submitted to *Science* (with Dr. Abner as lead author) shows quite remarkable process and results."

Reviewer (D): "[Professor Abner] has demonstrated significant research productivity during her [junior] career thus far. It is important to know that the stud[y] of homesign gestures, new sign languages, and established sign languages is very hard work for many reasons: deafness has low incidence in the population; there is no established writing system for gesture and sign language; and gathering data from new sign languages and homesigners in other countries requires intensive and informed fieldwork."
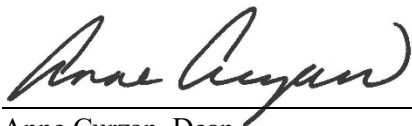
Reviewer (E): "Abner et al. (2019) is an outstanding paper, consistent with its being named the Best Paper published in the journal *Language* in that year. As the authors argue, the distinction between nouns and verbs is fundamental to human language. They examined this distinction in three deaf subject populations: 1) adult signers of ASL [American Sign Language] who received early exposure to ASL, 2)

adult signers of Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL) who varied in whether they belonged to the first, second, or third cohorts of signers of that language, and 3) adult Nicaraguan home signers who had had no systematic exposure to either Spanish or NSL…All three groups showed evidence of a noun-verb distinction, both in the distribution…and in the phonological shape of nouns and verbs. A crucial finding is that the first cohort of NSL signers showed evidence of this distinction; these signers were amongst the earliest signers of NSL when that language began to emerge in the late 1970s. Equally important is that the Nicaraguan home signers also showed evidence of a noun-verb distinction."

Reviewer (F): "One recent paper [Professor Abner] did alone was the 2021 chapter on determiner phrases. I was delighted to read it. This paper shows off the kind of tight argumentation that impressed me so long ago when she presented at [my school]…Many sign language linguists, facing data that suggest the absence of the DP [Determiner Phrase] architecture, throw up their hands and walk away from formal linguistics…[Professor Abner], instead, goes methodically and tirelessly through the relevant literature on DPs and NPs [Noun Phrases] in spoken languages, and addresses different analyses, in each case comparing the relevant data in sign to the data and claims in the spoken language analyses. She has an admirable commitment to linguistic theory, and a keen eye for noticing subtle data (where much of non-manual data in sign languages is easily overlooked) in conversational contexts."

Summary of Recommendation:
Professor Abner has gained recognition as one of the world's best researchers in the study of sign languages and gesture in language and communication. She has furthered the Department of Linguistics' and college's mission by building a rich research and instructional program exploring linguistic diversity in sign languages across multiple dimensions. She is an innovative researcher, a dedicated teacher, and a passionate advocate for the needs of disadvantaged communities, in particular the deaf community, which she engages with extensively in her research. The Executive Committee of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts and I recommend that Assistant Professor Natasha R. Abner be promoted to the rank of associate professor of linguistics, with tenure, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts.

Anne Curzan, Dean
Geneva Smitherman Collegiate Professor of
English Language and Literature, Linguistics,
and Education
Arthur F. Thurnau Professor
College of Literature, Science, and the Arts

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