

ASSESSMENT FOR THE  
UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE PROGRAMS  
OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS

1 May 1998

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM

**OBJECTIVES**

Undergraduate majors are expected to develop familiarity with, and some sophistication regarding, the basic elements of linguistic structure (phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics) and the analysis of abstract symbolic systems, and to acquire familiarity with the fundamentals of language change and linguistic reconstruction and the distribution of linguistic variation geographically and socially. Through electives—up to six credits of which may be taken in appropriate courses offered by other departments—undergraduate majors have the option of either deepening their knowledge of any of these things or exploring tangential areas such as speech disorders or the structures and histories of specific languages.

The Capstone Course (Linguis 426/7) is a course in which data is elicited directly from an informant and analyzed, and undergraduate majors are expected to bring to bear on this challenging task the full range of linguistic skills they have developed while majoring in Linguistics, while at the same time acquiring additional ones relating to the problems of elicitation and discovering, perhaps for the first time, how much analysis, generalization, and abstraction underlies even the simplest array of linguistic data such as they have encountered in courses they've taken in connection with the major hitherto.

**EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROGRAM**

We have attempted to gauge the effectiveness of our undergraduate program by sending out a questionnaire (copy attached) to the undergraduates who have gotten the BA or BS degree from the University of Wisconsin – Madison with a major in Linguistics in the past five years.

The total number sent out was 25; of these, one (to his UG campus address) was returned by the USPS; five graduates responded with filled-out questionnaires. There were no other responses.

Note that of the five respondents, two report that linguistics was one of two majors. This is generally in accord with the norm: the nature of both linguistic study and our major requirements makes it easy and natural to combine major areas of study.<sup>1</sup>

#### MEASURE OF SUCCESS

A 20% response for a questionnaire is robust, but there can be little surprise that it is difficult to frame generalizations on the basis of five responses, thoughtful and helpful as they generally were.

There is only one generalization that stands out, in fact: Four of the five, in response to a question about the Capstone Course (426 or 427) spoke of the experience in generally similar terms of high praise.<sup>2</sup>

*Given the objectives and purposes of the Capstone Course, as outlined above, the obvious inference from the strength of this response is that the objectives of the major in Linguistics have been achieved.*

Other than that, the closest thing to a generalization is that no two respondents either singled out the same matters for criticism, or mentioned the same matters or personnel for special praise.

#### PROGRAM EVALUATION

Constructive criticism of the program requirements as currently constituted was invited, and some was offered. However, two of the respondents' remarks seem to reflect a fundamental misunderstanding which is widespread in the population at large as well as among undergraduates, namely, that the college major is (or should be) some sort of vocational training.

Two former students indicated clearly that they thought they got more out of the non-formal aspects of linguistic study (one complaining specifically that formal linguistics, the core of the program's required courses, is unconnected with 'daily life') and one of these two identified a specific wish for courses in sociolinguistics. While these remarks are sensible, they do not necessarily point the way to any realizable changes. Linguistics is a

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<sup>1</sup> Owing to the way the College counts noses, this preternaturally large number of multiple majors results in an undercounting of Linguistics majors, which is unfortunate in view of the small number of our majors absolutely.

<sup>2</sup> The fifth testifies to having no memory of the course; the dates of the major indicated on that questionnaire suggest that the student in question declared a linguistics major prior to the imposition of the capstone course requirement.

huge field; most linguistic departments are very small, including this one (a point noted by a couple of respondents); and it follows therefore that a department the size of ours must be selective in what part of the field it attempts to focus on.

The one respondent, who is presently enrolled as a graduate student, remarked that the undergraduate curriculum here, insofar as the formal linguistics part, had seemed more like the propounding of dogma rather than a presentation of the issues in what is manifestly a field very much under development rather than "mature" in the Kuhnian sense. This comment is food for thought in considering our course content (which is of course constantly undergoing adjustment and revision). At the same time, it is the case that for undergraduate instruction there are limits, and fairly narrow ones, too, to the profitable discussion of competing theories and discordant strands within a given theoretical framework. At the graduate level, of course, it goes without saying that extensive discussion of such matters would be both appropriate and expected.

#### PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

As with every other aspect of the findings, there are no generalizations possible here (apart from enthusiasm for the capstone course). One respondent got more out of applied linguistics than out of formal linguistics and thought we should have more of that. Once again, the only problem we have with such a suggestion is our limited staff strength. One respondent thought that the language requirement should be made substantially more demanding, basically recommending a return to our pre-1976 requirement. This view is unlikely to be widely shared.

#### SUMMARY

The salient commentary on the Capstone Course in the major and the relationship of that course to our program objectives indicates a high level of success in the objectives of the undergraduate major program. At the same time, even with the limited response to our questionnaire, there seems to be no worrisome pattern of weakness or ineffectiveness in the program as it is, while and at the same time the questionnaires provide some useful advice on how we might rethink some details of the program.

## GRADUATE PROGRAM

### OBJECTIVES

To train advanced students in linguistic analysis, research, theory development, and scholarly writing, in certain areas of linguistics.

There are no degree options as such in the Department of Linguistics. All graduate students are required to take core courses in phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics, and historical linguistics, and then to concentrate in two areas (including but not limited to the five just named) by means of a combination of courses offered in the Department and elsewhere.

### EFFECTIVENESS OF PROGRAM

We have not developed any pro-active measure of effectiveness of our graduate program. Provisionally, however, we can form some sense of the success and value of our graduate program from the following statistics, which speak for themselves:

Of the 25 most recent recipients of the PhD degree in Linguistics, 20 now have appointments in academic departments here or abroad; two work for private industry in areas directly connected with their degree work; two are in administration in major research universities (UW– Madison and the University of Indiana); and one recent PhD is currently looking for a job.

# Department of Linguistics

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19 March 1998

To: Linguistics Majors  
From: The Department of Linguistics  
Re: Program Assessment

Dear Alums /ə'ləmz/,

All programs and departments in the University of Wisconsin are under obligation to evaluate the 'effectiveness' of the programs. How this is to be done is left up to the individual units; one method in wide use is the questionnaire, and Linguistics has decided to adopt this as our assessment method.

However, that being the case, we obviously need your help and cooperation.

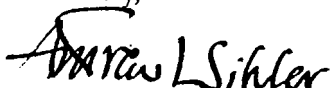
We are sending the enclosed questionnaire to all our undergraduate majors who graduated from the University of Wisconsin – Madison in the last five years. Now, I understand that questionnaires can be a pain and a nuisance, mainly because they have way of asking unanswerable questions; in fact, offhand I can't remember seeing *any* questionnaire that didn't suffer from that defect. Nevertheless, you would be doing us a very large favor indeed, as well as warming the cockles of the accreditors' hearts, if you would take a few minutes to try to tackle the enclosed questionnaire. An attempt has been made to neutralize the irritation of unanswerable questions by providing a number of opportunities for you to respond in your own words rather than by checking off preprogrammed alternatives. (And in any case, feel free to redefine questions in any way you think would be constructive.)

If you need more space than is provided—or if none is—feel free to write on the backs of the sheets or use separate sheets of paper.

I'm enclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope for your convenience.

Thank you, on behalf of your teachers and future Linguistics majors, for your willingness to participate in the assessment and improvement of our program in this way; it is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

  
Andrew L. Sihler

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☞ 1. What years did you attend the University of Wisconsin as an undergraduate?

\_\_\_\_\_ Did you graduate?    Yes    No

Roughly how many semesters did you attend?

Full time \_\_\_\_\_

Part time \_\_\_\_\_

☞ 2. What is your current employment status? (check as many as apply)

\_\_\_\_\_ employed full-time (how?) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ employed part-time (how?) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ unemployed

\_\_\_\_\_ graduate school

school \_\_\_\_\_

field \_\_\_\_\_

current status in program \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ other professional school

school \_\_\_\_\_

field \_\_\_\_\_

current status in program \_\_\_\_\_

☞ 3. How did you find out about the Linguistics Major at the U of Wisconsin?

\_\_\_\_\_ Bulletin/Catalogue

\_\_\_\_\_ Timetable

\_\_\_\_\_ A Friend

\_\_\_\_\_ Took a Linguistics course (which one?) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Took a linguistic-content course in another department

department: \_\_\_\_\_

course: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Advisor (check as many as apply)

\_\_\_\_\_ Cross-College Advising Service

\_\_\_\_\_ Faculty (L&S) Advising Service

\_\_\_\_\_ Advisor in another major

Which? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Other

Who? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Explain) \_\_\_\_\_

☞ 4. Did you double major?    Yes    No

(If 'yes' what other major(s) \_\_\_\_\_

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5. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is low and 10 is high, rate your overall experience in taking Linguistics courses with regard to the following

- \_\_\_\_\_ Reading load (as compared with courses in other departments)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Writing load
- \_\_\_\_\_ Learning pace in lecture
- \_\_\_\_\_ Quantity and quality of homework
- \_\_\_\_\_ Quantity and quality of exams
- \_\_\_\_\_ Your level of engagement with course content
- \_\_\_\_\_ Professors' capabilities and enthusiasm
- \_\_\_\_\_ Professors' accessibility
- \_\_\_\_\_ Overall quality of courses
- \_\_\_\_\_ Selection of courses offered
- \_\_\_\_\_ Frequency (scheduling) of courses offered
- \_\_\_\_\_ Integration of courses offered

Comments \_\_\_\_\_

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6. On a scale of 1 to 10, please tell us the degree to which your work in the major improved your ability to—

- \_\_\_\_\_ Read critically
- \_\_\_\_\_ Analyze linguistic arguments
- \_\_\_\_\_ Formulate linguistic arguments yourself
- \_\_\_\_\_ Understand contemporary linguistic theory
- \_\_\_\_\_ Undertake research in a familiar language
- \_\_\_\_\_ Undertake research in an unfamiliar language

Comments \_\_\_\_\_

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☞ 7. A field-methods course (either 426 or 427) is a “capstone” course for the major in Linguistics. Please evaluate your experience in this course. On a scale of 1 to 10, to what degree did the course—

- \_\_\_\_\_ Increase your appreciation of the complexity of human language
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give you a better understanding of the goals of contemporary linguistic theory
- \_\_\_\_\_ Help you to integrate your understanding of the various subfields of linguistics
- \_\_\_\_\_ Help you learn to collect and organize complex linguistic data
- \_\_\_\_\_ Help you learn to construct an argument based on primary linguistic data

Comments \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

☞ 8. Do any particular Linguistics courses stand out in your memory as being exceptionally good or bad? Please comment.

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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

☞ 9. On a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent), please rate the advising you received within the major

- \_\_\_\_\_ During the major overall
- \_\_\_\_\_ In connection with fulfilling graduation requirements
- \_\_\_\_\_ Relating to post-college plans

Comments \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

☞ 10. What would you most like to see changed about the way we teach and administer this major?

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☞ 11. What would you most like to see changed about the major requirements?

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☞ 12. If you had it all to do over, would you major again in linguistics? Why or why not?

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☞ 13. Any further comments?—

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