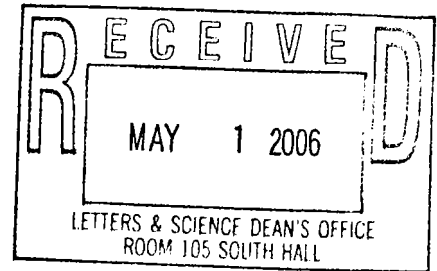


University of Wisconsin-Madison
DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS
1220 Linden Drive, 1168 Van Hise Hall



Assessment Plan of the Department of Linguistics
May 2006

Our department considered linguistics mostly a graduate discipline until about fifteen years ago, in line with the traditional view of linguistics. Applicants to the Ph. D. program were not expected to have any background in linguistics, let alone a major in linguistics. However, there has been a significant change in the field, particularly with the advancements made in generative linguistic theory. The field has grown significantly and now many departments require that applicants to their graduate programs have a sound background in linguistics, and many departments have developed strong undergraduate linguistics programs. This shift is visible in our department as well. Even as recently as the nineties, the department focused its resources on its MA and Ph.D. programs, with few undergraduate majors and no undergraduates in the department's honors program. Now, we have a rigorous undergraduate major, with many undergraduates doing honors in the major, and we still maintain a small but strong graduate program.

The Linguistics Undergraduate Program

The undergraduate program of the Linguistics Department has two overarching goals. One is to train the students in critical thinking and in analytical skills, so that they can cogently analyze linguistic data. The core of linguistics is problem solving. As in any other branch of science, linguistics focuses on finding the patterns in the facts. For many undergraduates, linguistics courses are their only opportunity to practice science, where they learn to examine data, construct falsifiable theories, and test their predictions. This not only teaches them how to do linguistics, but also teaches them in a hands-on fashion what science is and how scientists work.

The second goal is to provide the students with an accurate view of human languages. We know that misconceptions and prejudice abound when it comes to language, and they even shape public policy. This is often seen in debates over bilingual education, English-only movements, and in assumptions about the superiority of some languages over others. Our department aims to acquaint the undergraduates with facts about a large number of human languages that will lead them to unbiased views of language, with the expectation that these views will guide them in their communities, will help them become good citizens, and will eventually lead to a positive influence on public policies.

These two goals shape all our undergraduate teaching, including the large introductory linguistics class. In the early nineties, this course was redesigned with a strong focus on problem solving and on theoretical foundations. The course grew quickly, and the enrollment this semester is 320. The content of this course is now an accurate reflection of modern

linguistics, and we believe that its success is responsible for the rapid growth of the number of majors in linguistics. In 1996-1997, we had 17 majors. We now have 49. We have also observed a significant increase in the number of undergraduates in our 500-level courses.

The Linguistics Undergraduate Major

Learning objectives of the department for undergraduate majors are the following:

- Familiarity with data from a wide range of languages from different language families
- Familiarity with possible systematic differences between languages
- Familiarity with possible systematic similarities between languages
- Knowledge in all core areas of linguistics: Phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics
- Sound grasp of linguistic concepts
- Sound grasp of linguistic methodology
- Application of analytical skills and scientific approach in other areas of their lives
- Ability to respond to biased views of language in their communities

Assessment of the undergraduate major in linguistics

While in the program

- Course grades
- Performance in 500-level courses
- Receiving awards, fellowships, and internships
- Performance in the capstone courses 426 and 427, where they apply their skills to analyze data from a language they have no familiarity with

Of these assessment means, performance in the capstone courses is crucial. It tests whether the students have acquired the necessary background in linguistics, and also whether they can actually do linguistics.

After obtaining their B.A.

- Do the students continue on to graduate work in linguistics?
- Are the students accepted to graduate programs in linguistics departments with good reputations?
- Do the students continue on to graduate studies in other fields where they will use their linguistic skills?
- Do they obtain jobs where they will use the skills they acquired as linguistics majors?

Although we have some knowledge about the accomplishments of our majors after they graduate, we have not yet established a systematic way of gathering the necessary information. We plan on developing surveys in the next two years which will give us more complete data.

Many graduate programs in linguistics now require the applicants to submit a linguistics paper with their applications. Honors in the major are required to write honors theses, but other undergraduates do not necessarily have an opportunity to develop a paper under the guidance of a faculty member. Our department decided this year to design a new undergraduate course focusing on writing in linguistics, and we hope to submit the course proposal next fall. We expect this course to contribute significantly to the training of undergraduates in linguistics, and also to facilitate their acceptance into good graduate programs.

The Linguistics Ph.D. Program

In 1996-1997, there were 62 students in our M.A. and Ph.D. programs, even though the department had become smaller because of budget cuts preventing the replacement of faculty. Concerned about adequate guidance for our graduate students, the department decided to reduce the size of the graduate program. We stopped admitting applicants whose goal was a terminal M.A., focusing our attention instead on the Ph.D. students. The size of our graduate program was later also affected by the economic changes in East Asia, and we no longer get many students from Korea, Japan, or China. We started this academic year with 18 graduate students, at various stages in their graduate careers. Individual faculty members have been successful in recent years in getting grants to support our graduate students, but our inability to put together attractive financial packages makes recruitment difficult, and we do not foresee a significant increase in the number of our Ph.D. students in the near future.

Our objectives for our Ph.D. students are an increase in their knowledge of language facts and the development of their analytical skills to a point where they can conduct important and interesting research in linguistics.

Ph.D. program assessment

While in the program

- Two preliminary papers submitted by the student prior to admission to candidacy
- The oral defense of the student's dissertation
- Acceptance into refereed professional conferences
- Publications in refereed journals and conference proceedings
- Awards, fellowships, assistantships

After the degree

- Obtaining academic positions (teaching and research)
- Obtaining academia related positions (deans, advisors)
- Obtaining post-doctoral grants
- Obtaining linguistics related jobs in the private sector

The department frequently assesses its graduate program by using the criteria above, and we enthusiastically point out that almost all our Ph.D.s are placed in academic positions.