Report on the 2015 Linguistic Institute
Karlos Arregi and Alan Yu

The 2015 Linguistic Institute took place July 6–July 31, 2015 at the University of Chicago. Early funding from the Linguistic Society of America helped partially underwrite the planning and implementation of the Institute, certain student fellowships and named professorships. Additional funding from University of Chicago sources further helped with implementation. The rest of the costs of the Institute were covered by participant tuition and external sponsorships from the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics, the American Dialect Society, and the Dictionary Society of North America.

The theme of the 2015 Linguistic Institute was “Linguistic Theory in a World of Big Data”. Courses focused on skills and methods of data management and linguistic analysis, introductions to many of the field’s subdisciplines, and specialized courses that reflected on the Institute theme. We had a particularly robust set of courses in computational and statistical linguistic modeling and language-specific topic-oriented courses. We had courses taught by faculty from many of our sister disciplines, notably psychology, anthropology, and computer science.

As have some recent Institutes (MIT, Michigan), we ran our courses independently of official university credit due to the tuition costs for such credit. This had both costs and benefits. Overall, we believe that the benefits outweighed the costs as we had both more control and more flexibility with a variety of relevant details concerning classrooms, tuition, and registration.

The 2015 Institute welcomed 131 faculty and over 515 participants, approximately 38% of whom were international. These included more than 60 local interns, students from the University of Chicago, University of Illinois, Chicago, Northwestern University, Northeastern Illinois University and Bryn Mawr College who traded staffing the Institute for tuition. Roughly 62% of the participants were graduate students, 13% were “affiliates”, 19% were undergraduates or between post-baccalaureate, and approximately 1% were high school students.

In addition to our intern team, the Institute staff consisted of two faculty Co-Directors, an Administrative Director, a graphic designer, a web programmer, and an executive assistant who worked half time during the academic year and full time from June 1 to August 31st, 2015.

The curriculum was composed of 106 courses, which can be found here: https://lsa2015.uchicago.edu/courses. Classes were held for 110 minutes per session twice a week, meeting on either a Monday-Thursday or Tuesday-Friday schedule. Wednesdays were reserved as class-free days for workshops and other activities. 43 classes, mostly introductory courses, met for a total of eight sessions (4-week courses), while the others, which are more advanced and topical courses, met for four sessions only (36 for the first 2 weeks and 27 for the last 2 weeks). Classes were taught by 131 instructors (28 coming from outside the US and 17 from the University of Chicago). Like recent Institutes, the LSA sponsored the following named professors: Collitz Professor Johanna Nichols, University of California, Berkeley; Edward Sapir Professor Paul Smolensky, Johns Hopkins University, and Ken Hale Professor Anthony Woodbury, University of Texas, Austin. The 2015 institute also inaugurated the Charles Fillmore Professorship, with Dan Jurafsky, Stanford University. Each gave a traditional evening plenary lecture and taught a course. In addition to the LSA-sponsored named professors, there were four additional sponsored professorships. The American Dialect Society Professor Joseph Salmons, the Dictionary Society of North America Professors, Paul Cook, University of New Brunswick, and Edward Finegan, University of Southern California, and the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics Professor Alex Clark, King’s College London.

Nichols spoke on ‘Canonical head marking and the evolution of polysynthesis.’ Smolensky gave a lecture entitled ‘Grammar with Gradient Symbol Structures,’ Hale spoke on ‘The ‘genius’ of the language: discovering pervasive plan and unique design in linguistic description,’ and Jurafsky spoke on ‘Extracting social meaning from language: The computational linguistics of food, innovation, and community.’ Two Forum Lecturers presented an evening plenary lecture. Andrew Garrett, University of California, Berkeley, gave a lecture entitled ‘Ancestry relationships in linguistic phylogenetics.’ Masha Polinsky, Harvard University/University of Maryland, College Park, spoke on ‘Look before you leap.’

The Institute offered 10 co-located workshops/conferences, all of which were one- or two-day events. There were three evening professional preparation workshops run by COSIAC, covering topics such as the publishing process, the imposter syndrome, web presence and CV design as well as three LSA focus groups, led by LSA President, John Rickford, and the Bloch Fellow, Ivy Hauser. The institute also hosted weekly Wikipedia-edit-athon led by Gretchen McCulloch. In addition, the Institute hosted four Fieldworker Socials, and the pre-screening of the one-hour documentary Rising Voices/Họthañjoipi.
The 2015 Institute also hosted poster sessions where students were invited to present a poster during one of two poster sessions. A total of 89 posters were presented and the poster sessions were well-attended by institute participants.

There were several impromptu workshops on topics such as latex editing and dynamical systems. Representatives from the HathiTrust gave an information session about their research consortium and digital library.

The Institute maintained a vibrant website (https://lsa2015.uchicago.edu/), Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/groups/1424578817843208/) and Twitter account (@lsa_2015), all of which we used initially for advertising the Institute and then for providing information during the Institute, as well as for organizing various outings and activities. Several participants live tweeted different events and activities using the hashtag #lingstitute.

The Institute hosted a welcoming picnic on July 5 and a closing reception on July 31. We also held six receptions following evening events. Several of the pre- and post-lecture events also featured musical offerings by institute participants. In addition, participants enjoyed biking along the lakefront, the Grant Park Music Festival, baseball games, and the myriad beaches, parks, and museums in Chicago.