

# Why Major in Linguistics (and what does a linguist do)?

by Monica Macaulay and Kristen Syrett

## What is linguistics?

If you are considering becoming a linguistics major, you probably know something about the field of linguistics already. However, you may find it hard to answer people who ask you, "What exactly is linguistics, and what does a linguist do?" They might assume that it means you speak a lot of languages. And they may be right: you may, in fact, be a polyglot! But while many linguists do speak multiple languages—or at least know a fair bit about multiple languages—the study of linguistics means much more than this.

Linguistics is the scientific study of language, and many topics are studied under this umbrella. At the heart of linguistics is the search for the unconscious knowledge that humans have about language and how it is that children acquire it, an understanding of the structure of language in general and of particular languages, knowledge about how languages vary, and how language influences the way in which we interact with each other and think about the world.

What exactly do we mean by this? When you were born, you were not able to communicate with the adults around you by using language. But by the time you were five or six, you were able to produce sentences, make jokes, ask questions, and so on. In short, you had become a fluent native speaker. During those first few years of your life, you accumulated a wide range of knowledge about at least one language, probably with very little conscious effort. If you studied a foreign language later on, it's likely that you discovered that it was not nearly as easy.

Speakers of all languages know a lot about their languages, usually without knowing that they know it. For example, as a speaker of English, you possess knowledge about English word order. Perhaps without even knowing it, you understand that *Sarah admires the teacher is grammatical*, while *Admires Sarah teacher the* is not, and also that *The teacher admires Sarah* means something entirely different. You know that when you ask a yes-no question, you may reverse the order of words at the beginning of the sentence and that the pitch of your voice goes up at the end of the sentence (for example, in *Are you going?*).

However, if you speak French, you might add *est-ce que* at the beginning, and if you know American



Sign Language, you probably raise your eyebrows during the question. In addition, you understand that asking a wh-question (*who, what, where, etc.*) calls for a somewhat different strategy (compare the rising intonation in the question above to the falling intonation in *Where are you going?*). You also possess knowledge about the sounds of your language—for example, which consonants can go

together in a word. You know that *slint* could be an English word, while *sbint* could not be. And you most likely know something about the role of language in your interactions with others. You know that certain words are “taboo” or controversial, that certain contexts might require more formal or less formal language, and that certain expressions or ways of speaking draw upon shared knowledge between speakers.

Linguists investigate how people acquire their knowledge about language, how this knowledge interacts with other cognitive processes, how it varies across speakers and geographic regions, and how to model this knowledge computationally. They study how to represent the structure of the various aspects of language (such as sounds or meaning), how to account for different linguistic patterns theoretically, and how the different components of language interact with each other. Many linguists do fieldwork, collecting empirical evidence to help them gain insight into a specific language or languages in general. They work with speakers of different languages to discover patterns and/or to document the language, search databases (or corpora) of spoken and written language, and run carefully-designed experiments with children and adults in schools, in the field, and in university labs. Yes, linguistics is a science!

By now you can see that while linguists may be better informed if they know multiple languages, the work of a linguist actually involves learning about Language, rather than learning different languages.

### What will I study as a linguistics major?

Linguistics is a major that gives you insight into one of the most intriguing aspects of human knowledge and behavior. Majoring in linguistics means that you will learn about many aspects of human language, including sounds (phonetics, phonology), words (morphology), sentences (syntax), and meaning (semantics). It can involve looking at how languages change over time (historical linguistics); how language varies from situation to situation, group to group, and place to place (sociolinguistics, dialectology); how people

use language in context (pragmatics, discourse analysis); how to model aspects of language (computational linguistics); how people acquire or learn language (language acquisition); and how people process language (psycholinguistics, experimental linguistics).

Linguistics programs may be organized around different aspects of the field. For example, in addition to or instead of the above areas, a program might choose to focus on a particular language or group of languages; how language relates to historical, social, and cultural issues (anthropological linguistics); how language is taught in a classroom setting, or how students learn language (applied linguistics); or the connections between linguistics and cognitive science.

Although linguistics programs in the United States may vary in their emphasis and their approach, they tend to have similar requirements. You will most likely be required to take an introductory course in linguistics, and to take one or more courses in the core theoretical areas of linguistics. You may also be required or encouraged to have proficiency in at least one language besides English in order to help you understand how languages vary and how your native language fits into the bigger picture and informs your judgments.

In addition, you may be encouraged to complement your linguistic studies with courses in related areas, such as cognitive psychology, cognitive science, philosophy, anthropology, computer science, or communication sciences. You might choose to double major and make your linguistic work part of an interdisciplinary program of study. A secondary specialization in one of the areas just mentioned complements a linguistics major nicely, and can enhance your training and marketability. You may also choose to engage in independent research, such as working as an assistant in a language laboratory, spending time studying and/or traveling abroad, or doing fieldwork. Taking advantage of these opportunities allows you to be more well-rounded and better informed, and will open more doors for you after graduation.

## What opportunities will I have with a linguistics degree?

Students who major in linguistics acquire valuable intellectual skills, such as analytical reasoning, critical thinking, argumentation, and clarity of expression. This means making insightful observations, formulating clear, testable hypotheses, generating predictions, making arguments and drawing conclusions, and communicating findings to a wider community. Linguistics majors are therefore well equipped for a variety of graduate-level and professional programs and careers. Some may require additional training or skills, but not all do.

### Graduate Studies and Professional Programs

- ❖ MA and PhD programs in fields such as linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, computer science, anthropology, philosophy, communication sciences, education, English, cognitive neuroscience, and the study of particular language(s)
- ❖ TESOL and applied linguistics programs focused on teaching English to non-native speakers
- ❖ Professional programs such as law school, speech pathology, communication sciences and disorders, or library/information science

### Career Opportunities

**Work in the computer industry:** Training in linguistics can equip you to work on speech recognition, text-to-speech synthesis, artificial intelligence, natural language processing, and computer-mediated language learning.

**Work in education:** People with a background in linguistics and education can develop materials for different populations, train teachers, design assessments, find effective ways to teach language-related topics in specific communities, or use the language of a community effectively in instruction. Many applied linguists are involved in teacher education and educational research.

**Teach English as a Second Language (ESL) in the United States or abroad:** If you want to teach ESL in the US, you will probably need additional training in language pedagogy, such as credentials in Teaching English as a Second or Other Language (TESOL). Many teaching positions abroad require only an undergraduate degree, but at least some specialized training in the subject will make you a much more effective teacher. Linguistics can give you a valuable cross-language perspective.

**Teach at the university level:** If you go on to get a graduate degree in linguistics you might teach in departments such as Linguistics, Philosophy, Psychology, Speech/Communication Sciences, Anthropology, English, and departments focused on specific foreign languages.

**Work as a translator or interpreter:** Skilled translators and interpreters are needed everywhere, from government to hospitals to courts of law. For this line of work, a high level of proficiency in the relevant language(s) is necessary, and additional specialized training may be required.

**Teach a foreign language:** Your students will benefit from your knowledge of language structure and your ability to make certain aspects of the language especially clear. You will need to be very proficient in the relevant language, and you may need additional training in language pedagogy.



**Work on language documentation or conduct fieldwork:** Some agencies and institutes seek linguists to work with language consultants in

order to document, analyze, and preserve languages (many of which are endangered). Some organizations engage in language-related fieldwork, conducting language surveys, establishing literacy programs, and translating documents of cultural heritage.

**Work in the publishing industry, as a technical writer, or as a journalist:** The verbal skills that linguists develop are ideal for positions in editing, publishing, and writing.

**Work for a testing agency:** Linguists help prepare and evaluate standardized exams and conduct research on assessment issues.

**Work with dictionaries (lexicography):** The development of good dictionaries requires the help of qualified linguistic consultants. Knowledge of phonology, morphology, historical linguistics, dialectology, and sociolinguistics is key to becoming a lexicographer.

**Become a consultant on language in professions such as law or medicine:** The subfield of forensic linguistics involves studying the language of legal texts, linguistic aspects of evidence, issues of voice identification, and so on. Law enforcement agencies such as the FBI and police departments, law firms, and the courts hire linguists for these purposes.

**Work for an advertising company:** Companies that specialize in advertising often do extensive linguistic research on the associations that people make with particular sounds and classes of sounds and the kind of wording that would appeal to potential consumers.

**Work for the government:** The federal government hires linguists for the Foreign Service, the Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI), the

National Security Agency (NSA), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Department of Defense, the Department of Education, and so on. Similar opportunities may exist at the state level.

**Become an actor or train actors:** Actors need training in pronunciation, intonation, and different elements of grammar in order to sound like real speakers of a language or dialect. They may even need to know how to make mistakes to sound like an authentic non-native speaker.

Are you still curious about linguistics but not ready to become a linguistics major? Enroll in an introductory-level linguistics course, consider a minor, or take a look at introductory textbooks or course materials. Introductory and advanced linguistics courses often satisfy distribution requirements for other majors. Talk to a linguist! Faculty members in Linguistics departments are usually quite happy to talk with prospective students and answer questions about the major and the field.

### Additional Resources

#### **Linguistic Society of America:**

[www.linguisticsociety.org](http://www.linguisticsociety.org)

Our website has a wide range of information about the field of linguistics, resources for students, a directory of undergraduate and graduate programs in the US, job postings, and many additional resources.

#### **The LINGUIST List:** [www.linguistlist.org](http://www.linguistlist.org)

This website and accompanying email list have just about any kind of information on the field that you could possibly want, including a student portal, up-to-date conference listings, job postings, a means to post questions and make inquiries to members of the field, and other resources.



1325 18th St, NW, Suite 211, Washington, DC 20036-6501 ☎ Phone: (202) 835-1714  
e-mail: [lsa@lsadc.org](mailto:lsa@lsadc.org) ☎ web: <http://www.linguisticsociety.org>

*Photos courtesy of Michael Yoshitaka Erlewine and Hrayr Khanjian*