

**PROGRAM REVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS**  
**University of Washington**  
**Winter 2000**

The Linguistics Review Committee was formed to assess the quality of the degree programs of the Linguistics Department, to provide constructive criticism for improving or strengthening these programs, and to suggest how the College of Arts and Sciences can assist the Department in fulfilling its mission.

The following report has been endorsed by all members of the Review Committee: Professors Charles M. Barrack, Germanics, UW (Chair); S. Marc Cohen, Philosophy, UW; Peter W. Culicover, Linguistics, OSU; Patricia A. Keating, Linguistics, UCLA; Carol Stoel-Gammon, Speech & Hearing Sciences, UW.

## **I. SUMMARY OF THE PROCESS**

Approximately a week before the visit of the off-campus members of the Review Committee, the on-campus members scheduled meetings with individual faculty members (including adjunct members) as well as with interested students, both graduate and undergraduate. Those who could not attend were invited to send their comments to the chair of the Committee.

To supplement the self-study document, the Review Committee obtained the following information: (1) From the Department, data on current TA positions outside the Department; (2) from the University web site, summaries of student evaluations of Linguistics classes;

The off-campus members of the Review Committee visited the Department on February 1–2. We interviewed each faculty member individually (30 minutes for most faculty) and a group of about ten graduate students (no undergraduate students appeared at the meeting set up especially for them).

## **II. OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE DEPARTMENT**

### **A. Reputation**

The reputation of a linguistics program depends on several factors: the strengths in the core subfields, the strengths in the emerging interdisciplinary subfields, and the quality and organization of the graduate and undergraduate programs. Over the past thirty years or so, the recognized core subfields have been syntax, phonology, and semantics, while the major interdisciplinary subfields are phonetics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and computational linguistics. Programs may also be distinguished by emphases on particular languages or language groups. In

some universities certain language departments house linguists who focus on the respective languages and have ties to the linguistics department as well. It is generally agreed that no single program can be expected to cover all of the interdisciplinary subfields or the major language groups.

In our judgment the Department of Linguistics at the University of Washington ranks in the second tier of programs in the country. In the first tier we would place MIT, UCLA, Ohio State, University of Massachusetts, Stanford, and perhaps Rutgers, which has invested significant resources in recent years. In the second tier we would place Penn, USC, Arizona, Santa Cruz, Illinois, Indiana and perhaps one or two others, such as NYU and Berkeley, along with UW. Where UW stands precisely is a judgment that people will differ on, depending on the value that they place on the various factors that distinguish the different programs. Our own view is that UW has particular strengths in contemporary syntactic theory, Romance linguistics, second language acquisition, the study of Native American languages, and phonetics. The Department is strong in phonology and semantics as well. But Rutgers has placed great emphasis on syntactic theory as well, has a strong association with optimality theory in phonology, and has a strong group in semantics. Penn is very strong in computational linguistics and sociolinguistics, while Arizona has an emphasis in Native American languages and psycholinguistics. Santa Cruz is relatively small but very strong in the core theoretical areas. And so on.

In some respects UW is in a transitional phase, and its reputation will reflect this. The Department used to be very strong in syntactic theory, with a virtually exclusive emphasis on MIT-style theory (Fritz Newmeyer perhaps being the exception). There have been a number of significant changes since the departure of Joe Emonds: the retirement of Heles Contreras, the shift of resources into phonetics with the recruitment of two junior faculty (Richard Wright and Alicia Wassink), and the recruitment of Soowon Kim in syntax, among others. While there is now still a strong focus on the MIT approach to syntax, with Newmeyer, Karen Zagana, and Julia Herschensohn, the perspective of the Department is somewhat broader than in the past, given Kim's interests in optimality theory and Newmeyer's continuing broad view of the field. Given the trends in the field as a whole, this increased breadth in the Department is, in our view, a positive development. It is likely that the field of syntax will continue to diversify, fragment, and reconverge for some years to come, and students need to have a realistic view of what is going on. At the same time, the lack of a uniform focus in syntax might signify a weakness, in the judgment of some. This is a judgment that we do not share. Nevertheless, it is also true that the syntax area is not nearly as senior as it was in the past, and this may be reflected in the reputation.

The recent move into phonetics is, in our view, an extremely wise one. Phonetics is an area that is emerging as a fundamental component of a contemporary linguistics program, because of its relationship to phonological theory, to the study of human language processing, and to speech technology.

In order to make this move the Department had to decide not to replace Cecile McKee in language acquisition. While it is unfortunate that the Department is no longer able to cover language acquisition, this appears to have been a good decision on balance, because of the more central role of phonetics.

We note that there is no true deadwood in this department. Everyone is active in research and publishing, with one possible exceptional case. The senior faculty in every area are solid and important contributors to their discipline, while the more junior faculty appear to be making good progress in developing their careers. There is a real possibility that the two junior hires in phonetics could become major figures before too long, making Washington a powerhouse in this area.

### **B. Quality of Teaching**

The Review Committee was pleased to hear that all full-time Linguistics faculty are required to teach LING 100, 200 or 400 at least once per year. A review of the student evaluations of 12 of the Linguistics faculty in 17 courses reveals an average response of 4.3 on a scale of 1-5 to the question concerning instructor's contribution to the particular course—a very commendable average. (See attachment: "Student Evaluations".)

In order to get a feel for the quality of the graduate program we examined the course offerings, the requirements, and the course descriptions. We saw nothing that would raise any concern. The courses at the graduate level are taught by the appropriate individuals, the descriptions are appropriate to the level of instruction, and, judging from the topics, are quite challenging.

### **C. Graduate Students**

The graduate students are outstanding. The ones that we met were bright, engaged, and very pleased with the program. There is a tremendously positive feeling for the program in spite of the difficulties that the lack of adequate space and support presents. We posed the question as to whether students specializing in non-traditional areas of research were receiving appropriate guidance. We were pleased to receive uniformly positive responses to this question. It is instructive to note that in terms of statistical measures the graduate students are comparable and in certain respects superior to those at Ohio State and UCLA. The following are the GRE scores and undergraduate GPA's for the 1999-00 first year students at Ohio State, UCLA, and UW.

	GRE's			GPA
	VERBAL	QUANTITATIVE	ANALYTICAL	
OSU	622	718	665	3.74
UCLA	641	687	680	3.82
UW	641	661	704	3.65

These numbers reinforce the view that the graduate students recruited to UW are on par with the best in the country. Moreover, the number of graduate students presently enrolled in Department appears appropriate, given the number of faculty.

#### D. The Research Environment: Phonetics Lab

The Departmental phonetics lab was set up after a group of faculty got an NSF grant for that purpose in 1993. The Department provided the space for the lab from its existing resources by eliminating its student lounge, a move that continues to this day to cause difficulties for students (as discussed elsewhere in this report). After the lab was established, the Department hired two phoneticians (Alicia Wassink, Richard Wright) to train students in phonetics and to run the lab; since Wassink is a sociolinguist as well as a phonetician, the phonetics lab now also contains the Department's sociolinguistics lab facilities. Start-up funds for these new hires were used for additional equipment for research and teaching, and the lab is now very well-equipped. Furthermore, Prof. Wright is thinking creatively about how best to use the facilities for teaching, when the lab itself is too small to permit classes of students to visit or use it.

The Department's self-study stresses that "the phonetics laboratory is a research and teaching resource for the entire Department and for the wider University community ... providing service to other academic institutions and to the general public." This is an admirable goal but in its present realization is cause for concern, in that there is no technical support for the lab. The work of maintaining the lab falls entirely on the faculty, especially its director, Asst. Prof. Wright. We know of no other department running an open-access, general-purpose lab without technical support staff. The Department and the University need to understand that when this service is provided by faculty, it comes at the expense of their ability to do their own research and to apply for outside grants.

While having an all-purpose shared facility hurts Wright in terms of demands on his time, it hurts Wassink in terms of access to equipment. It seems that the special-purpose equipment she bought with her start-up money for her own work must also serve all the students, and is therefore often not available for Wassink to use. It

is not in the best interests of assistant professors in general, and highly-visible minority assistant professors in particular, to have to do all their research in a public space where they can be constantly interrupted by students. Wassink in particular deserves her own workstation in her own office.

Many departments follow the model that is somewhat disparaged in the self-study ("maintained for the use of a single faculty researcher and his or her students"). However, this is the only model compatible with having very limited space and relying on faculty to run the lab, and it solves the problem of sharing specialized research equipment between faculty and students. We would not recommend that the UW Linguistics Department revert to that model, but we strongly encourage the Department and University to improve the current situation.

#### E. Intellectual and physical environment

One of the intangibles that one uses to measure the quality of a linguistics department is the intellectual environment, that is, the extent to which faculty and students are actively engaged in the exploration of ideas. It is difficult to judge the intellectual environment in a short visit, and so we can only make some general comments and suggestions.

Given the lack of common space for members of the Department, it is extraordinarily difficult for most members of the Department to have the kind of spontaneous interactions that a positive intellectual environment is based on. An exception would be the phonetics lab, which is a physical space devoted to research and likely to attract students around the two faculty, Wassink and Wright, whose research is carried out in this space. The existence of a physical space for phonetics and no space for others raises the worry that there will be a bifurcation of the Department as students pursue research topics that allow them to have some human interaction (i.e. lab activities) and move away from the non-lab fields.

We did note that there is a syntax reading group, and this is the type of activity that should be encouraged in all areas where the Department feels that it needs to have a respectable level of activity. In fact, we would go so far as to say that in the absence of physical spaces for people to meet, scheduled reading groups are probably essential for maintaining the esprit of the students and the continued commitment of the faculty. The faculty should have clearly in mind that there are two purposes of such groups: the examination of the ideas, and the maintenance of the intellectual and social environment.

The Review Committee is cognizant of the fact that the problem of space is a very difficult one for the University. Nevertheless, we believe that the College should place Linguistics near the top of its prioritized list of areas in dire need of remediation. Both students as well as faculty were uniform in their dismay over the deleterious effects of the lack of adequate space on the Department's educational

mission. David Miles, the Administrative Assistant in Linguistics, told the Review Committee that he has seen a marked deterioration in the degree of departmental cohesion over the years because of the lack of common spaces for meetings—casually or formally—for intellectual give and take: TA's are now separated from the Department Office by being housed over a block away in the Lewis Annex. Undergraduates studying under TA's rarely come in contact with full-time faculty in the hall or in other common spaces because the undergraduates must go to the Lewis Annex, where their TA's have their offices, for consultation. As a consequence, opportunities for undergraduates to be engaged in research (long a tradition at UW) are significantly reduced, if not entirely eliminated.

#### F. Graduate Student Milestones

The progression of graduate students through the Linguistics program in a timely fashion might be improved by tying departmental milestones (completion of course requirements for the MA, submitting the papers that constitute the written portion of the Ph.D. general exam, etc.) more explicitly to the calendar. The irregular progression that is now common no doubt results from the need of many Linguistics graduate students to take time off from their studies to work at outside jobs--a need that is an almost inevitable consequence of the fact the Department is forced to give its graduate students at most one or two quarters a year of support as TA's. Still, some improvement may be obtained by setting deadlines for the completion of at least some requirements. It is not obvious how this should be done, but we recommend that the Department address this issue when it next considers ways of improving its graduate programs.

#### G. Undergraduate Program and Need for Additional TA's

The enhancement of the undergraduate curriculum depends on the Department's being given additional TA support. At present, the only Linguistics course to which TA's are assigned is LING 200, which is given every quarter with enrollments in the 220-230 student range each quarter. This one course uses up the Department's entire allocation of four TA's. As a result, enrollment in LING 100—a course designed to acquaint students with basic grammatical concepts, especially as an introduction to taking foreign language courses—has had to be capped at 90-100, and this has had two highly undesirable consequences. First, many students are regularly denied access to the course, and, second, even at its current size, it cannot be effectively taught without TA's. For such a technical course to be effective, participants must be frequently assigned homework on formal problems. Yet without TA's to aid in correcting the homework, an adequate amount of homework cannot be assigned. So there is a real and immediate need for two additional TA-ships to enable Linguistics to offer a pedagogically adequate LING 100 every quarter. (If plans to develop LING 101, "Sounds of the World's Languages"--a practical phonetics course with the goal of helping students develop a better pronunciation, including in

English for the foreign born—are carried out, at least one additional TA-ship would also be required to help correct phonetic transcriptions. The Review Committee finds the plan to introduce such a useful course to be a very commendable idea.)

We would like to dispel any possible confusion there might be about the Department's ability to allocate its current TA's in such a way as to accommodate LING 100. The confusion arises from a cursory inspection of the statistics concerning courses taught by teaching assistants who are graduate students in Linguistics. During Autumn Quarter, 1998, for example, Graduate School statistics show that 19 graduate students in Linguistics held TA positions. However, only 6 of these were teaching courses in Linguistics —4 funded by permanent allocation to the Department, 1 by leave recapture, and 1 with special funding based on enrollment. The other 13 can be accounted for as follows: 4 were teaching in the Asian Department; 3 in Spanish and Portuguese; 2 in French and Italian; 2 were Staff Assistants supported by the Language Learning Center; 1 was an SA serving as TA coordinator in Spanish and Portuguese; and 1 was an SA serving as the Undergraduate Advisor in Linguistics.

As these data show, the Department of Linguistics has been commendably resourceful in coming up with alternative means of support for its graduate students. But such support has serious drawbacks. For one, it depends on the use of recapture funds and on the good will of other departments, and hence is variable from term to term and does not provide a reliable source for staffing a sectioned LING 100. For another, it provides the TA's no practice in teaching Linguistics. But our main point is that the case for augmenting the Department's TA allocation (*which, by the way, has remained fixed for the past thirty years, in spite of enrollment increases*) can be made entirely on the basis of the needs of the undergraduate curriculum, rather than on the need to support graduate students.

### III. 5-7 YEAR GOALS

The Department's Self-Study Document lists an array of goals for the next 5-7 years, focusing on strengthening the Department's teaching mission and research goals, and on building better relationships with other University programs. The Review Committee viewed the goals' statement as thoughtful and appropriate. In terms of prioritizing goals, we felt two were particularly important:

1. The desire to maintain a "high level of research activity" and to apply for major grants from agencies such as NSF and NIH: Grant support will help build the research programs of the two newly hired assistant professors, will provide the means for supporting graduate students as research assistants, and, in some cases, will allow the Department to collaborate with other departments on campus.

2. The desire to "explore all avenues leading to the hiring of a computational linguist": The question was raised as to whether there should be a terminal MA in computational linguistics. In our view, this would be a very natural route to take, if the faculty resources were available to teach these students. It is our understanding that there is considerable interest in such a degree program among undergraduates, and it also appears to be the case that a master's degree in Linguistics with the appropriate emphases would be entirely appropriate for people seeking to gain employment in technology-related fields. Such a degree program could require a certainly level of expertise in the core linguistic fields of syntax, semantics, and phonology, introductory tools and techniques in language processing, and basic concepts in computational linguistics per se. It seems to us that local employers might be interested in helping to fund such a position, given that it would produce a steady stream of qualified graduates.

For this reason there is unanimous agreement among members of the Review Committee that a computational linguist would be an enormous benefit to the Department: Such a specialist would increase the current curricular offerings by teaching classes of interest to students from many departments (Linguistics, Psychology, Speech and Hearing Sciences, Computer Science) and could establish links between the Linguistics Department and high tech firms in the Seattle area. Furthermore, such a specialist could bring in grants that would help the Department in many ways (see comments in #1 directly above).

The Self-Study Document also described how the College could assist the Department in achieving its goals. The Review Committee is aware that, even though the needs are legitimate, requests for increases in salary and space are difficult to fulfill. We feel, however, that the request for increased support to graduate students merits high priority. It is difficult for any department to attract and keep high quality graduate students when the support is limited to two quarters each year.

#### **IV. A POSSIBLE COGNITIVE SCIENCE PROGRAM**

Another question raised in the review was that concerning cognitive science. It is important to recognize that as an interdisciplinary area, cognitive science is something that will be successful at a university only if there are incentives for faculty to devote some of their attention to it. The primary incentive is that the opportunities for contact and interaction with faculty, and students, from other departments and other disciplines offers the possibility of being able to make some progress on solving difficult scientific problems. In addition, there must be at least one person who feels the need to develop interdisciplinary interactions sufficiently strongly that he or she is willing to play a leadership role in making this happen.

Regarding the role of linguistics in cognitive science, there is no predetermined level of involvement that linguists should play in such a program. It depends on



what they are working on. Our review of the Department suggests that perhaps the phoneticians would benefit from interaction with other disciplines; in fact there are already contacts with faculty in psychology. There do not appear to be any particularly obvious affinities between the other faculty, i. e., those in syntax, semantics or phonology, although we did not pursue the question that extensively with everyone that we spoke to. It is possible that the faculty in second language acquisition could benefit from interactions with faculty in other disciplines, although we did not have any sense that there were likely candidates.

It is also important not to try to define a cognitive science program independently of the people who would naturally be involved. Cognitive science takes many different forms at different places, and in order to be successful it needs to be built out of the existing strengths. It is important not to allow a single faculty member to impose his or her view of what cognitive science should be; this is a recipe for failure.

It does appear that there is a core of faculty at the University who might be interested in seeing the development of a cognitive science effort. The name of Pat Kuhl of Speech and Hearing was mentioned to us as someone who might have a strong interest in seeing something develop. Carol Stoel-Gammon of the same department might also be involved. David Corina and Lee Osterhout in Psychology work on language processing and would also be natural participants. Mari Ostendorf of Electrical Engineering is an outstanding hire who works in speech technology, and of course Richard Wright and Alicia Wassink of Linguistics could benefit from interacting with this group and are already doing so to some extent. Possibly there are others. In light of the interests of the individuals mentioned above who would constitute this group, it would be very natural to extend the direction of this program into speech technology, language development and processing, and computational linguistics.

Possible contacts in the neurosciences, through imaging, would also be natural. There are many other areas of cognitive science that do not involve linguistics at all, such as computational vision, artificial intelligence and reasoning systems, but we did not have the opportunity to assess whether these exist at UW and whether they would contribute to an interdisciplinary program.

## V. STAFF SUPPORT

The Department has only two staff positions, an Administrative Assistant B (AA), who holds a half-time appointment, and an Office Assistant III (OA), who is employed full-time during the academic year and half-time in the summer. The Review Committee met with David Miles, the Administrative Assistant, whose position is presently shared by Linguistics and Slavic Languages. We were very impressed with his knowledge of the Linguistics Department's needs and his dedication to the job. His responsibilities include "supervising the OA III, trouble-

shooting problems relating to Department office computers, communicating, interpreting and acting on a myriad of University policies and procedures and purchasing, payroll, and budget-related activities." In addition, he provides reports to the Chair, takes minutes at faculty meetings, and serves as the assistant to the Graduate Program Coordinator. This is an enormous amount of work for a half-time position! Based on comments from the faculty and students and on our conversation with Mr. Miles, the Committee feels the Department would benefit from employing Miles as a full-time Administrative Assistant.

One of the Department's goals is to increase the number of grants held by faculty; another is to expand and upgrade the Department's web sites relating to courses and graduate programs. Both of these goals will have clear benefits for the Department's teaching and research missions, but both will require additional staff support; hence we recommend that Mr. Miles be given a full-time position in Linguistics.

## **VI. MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES**

### **A. Historical Linguistics**

One of the questions addressed to the Review Committee by the College concerned the Department's stance vis-à-vis the field of historical linguistics. Is there evidence of an underlying antipathy toward this area of linguistics? The Committee was unable to find the slightest evidence for such an animus. On the contrary, professors primarily involved in this area of research and teaching (e. g., Adjunct Professor Joe Voyles and Professor Jurgen Klausenburger) were uniform in their praise of the Department for its unwavering support. Indeed, one of the areas of specialization in the graduate program is historical linguistics.

### **B. The Language Use and Acquisition (LUA) Program**

Respondents to this question were uniform in their opinion that the LUA program is doing well in the English Department, which now appears to function as its quasi-center. The Linguistics faculty expressed no interest in "relocating" LUA to the Linguistics Department.

### **C. Specialization Among Adjunct Faculty**

A number of students—as well as the Administrative Assistant, David Miles—suggested that students, especially incoming students, would benefit from being provided with a list indicating the various areas of interest and specialization of the adjunct faculty.