

University of Washington Department of Linguistics Ten-Year Review

Report of the Review Committee, February 22, 2022

Members of the Review Committee:

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A. Synopsis:

Linguistics is a broad and interdisciplinary approach to the study of language structure. Given its breadth, Linguistics as an academic discipline can be seen from multiple perspectives: as a natural science, investigating the properties of human brains that make language possible; as a social science, investigating language as a function of the communities within which it arises; and as a field in the humanities, taking a logical analytical approach to this uniquely human phenomenon. This variety of perspectives pervades the field, and oftentimes a particular program will see itself as fitting better within one or another viewpoint, but frequently multiple perspectives can be found even within a single program.

The Department of Linguistics at UW contributes to all of these areas of linguistics. Its faculty are particularly well-known for their work in three areas: computational linguistics, which uses computational modeling to advance understanding of linguistic structure (and vice-versa); sociolinguistics, which considers the ways that languages are used in a variety of social contexts; and phonetics and phonology, the domains of linguistics focusing on understanding the nature and patterning of the sound bits that make up words and sentences. A highlight in its reputation is the Computational Linguistics M.S. and Ph.D. track, which successfully prepares students for lucrative careers in the tech industry while instilling understanding of the social factors around language and the harms that are done when these are ignored.

In recent years, the field of linguistics has increased its emphasis on experimental approaches to gathering linguistic data, and the department has kept pace, by hiring faculty members with expertise in this area. These faculty members are highly promising and are already conducting influential and important research. These selections, along with recent departures, have left the program regrettably thin in the areas of theoretical syntax and semantics, among the core fields that any linguistics department must include. One of the recommendations of this Committee is that future hiring focus on these areas.

UW Linguistics department faculty are productive in research and in obtaining grants to support research. It should be noted that Linguistics as a field is mixed in terms of grants, with some subfields much more grant active than others; in this regard, the UW department is noteworthy for its degree of involvement in grants. Given this, appropriate support for grants

(pre- and post-award), and infrastructure support for the labs in which the research funded by these grants is conducted, is needed. Our recommendations include addressing specific needs in these areas.

The Graduate program at UW Linguistics includes the M.S. in Computational Linguistics (CLMS) already mentioned, as well as a Ph.D. program with tracks in CL or general linguistics. The Ph.D. program has characteristics typical of U.S. Ph.D. programs in Linguistics, which is appropriate for students in general; however, the majority of graduates from this program move into non-academic careers, particularly in the tech industry. With this in mind, the Committee recommends that the Department consider making adjustments to the program to support this kind of transition. Graduate students are supported by a combination of Research and Teaching Assistantships, which is again typical for Linguistics departments. However, members of the Committee were surprised by the degree to which TA positions are funded by the internal resources generated by the CLMS program; we recommend that the administration ensure that appropriate levels of funding for assistantships per class size are provided from central funding.

The Undergraduate program at UW Linguistics has seen increased numbers of students over the past few years, in part derived from very highly enrolled lower-division courses. The service that the department provides to undergraduate students, both majors and non-majors, is impressive. The courses offered cover a wide range of topics, and overall student satisfaction with the program is high. There are some improvements needed in the area of advising, which the Committee hopes can be addressed by increasing communication between the advising center and a departmental committee focusing on undergraduate curriculum. A particular strength of the undergraduate offerings within the department are the courses in American Sign Language and deaf culture. The Committee sees these as an important component of the department and is impressed with the degree of integration between the ASL faculty and courses and the rest of the department.

Overall, the Committee finds that the UW Linguistics department is very strong. In the following sections, we describe our review process, and expand on each of the areas discussed in this synopsis. **We recommend that the subsequent review take place within the usual 10-year cycle.** We make some specific recommendations for the department and administration in the final section below.

B. Review Process:

The Review Committee was sent its charge on June 15, 2021, and provided with the Linguistics Department's self-study report, a draft site visit agenda, and guidelines for the final report, along with copies of the previous review committee's March 2011 report and associated documents. On January 4, 2022, in view of recent developments in the Covid-19 pandemic, plans for an in-person site visit were shifted to virtual meetings, and the final, slightly revised agenda was announced on January 11.

During the site visit on January 24 and 25, the Committee met with Department faculty and with students enrolled in the undergraduate major, the Computational Linguistics MA

program, and the General Linguistics MA and PhD programs. The Committee also met with undergraduate advisors and Department staff.

The Committee asked questions about (1) the quality of the Department's degree programs and the preparation of students for professional and academic careers; (2) the department's programs and scholarship, as compared to peer institutions; (3) desired improvements that would enhance the department's educational programs, scholarship, and national prominence. The Committee also addressed unit-defined questions asked by the Department in its self-assessment document including thoughts about the department as a welcoming environment for students, faculty or staff of underrepresented backgrounds. Among other discussion topics was the quality of the Department's physical space – laboratories, offices, and meeting rooms. Participants were encouraged to raise additional topics or concerns that would help the Committee prepare its report.

At various times during the site visit and following it, the Committee members discussed their observations and findings. The Committee members agreed on the overall format of this report; portions were drafted by different members but all contributed and agreed on the final report.

C. Quality of the Department:

Since the last review, the purview of the Department of Linguistics has expanded to reflect the movement of the field at large into experimental approaches to linguistic research, as evidenced by the recent hires of Naja Ferjan Ramirez, Qi Cheng and Myriam Lapierre. At the same time, they retain strengths in several subfields of linguistics, including phonetics and phonology (Richard Wright, Sharon Hargus, Myriam Lapierre, Laura McGarrity), sociolinguistics (Alicia Beckford Wassink and Betsy Evans), and computational linguistics (Emily Bender, Fei Xia, Gina-Anne Levow, and Shane Steinert-Threlkeld). While the professors of syntax (Barbara Citko) and semantics (Toshiyuki Ogihara) in the department are of excellent quality, they are each the only representative of these two core subfields of linguistics. The lack of colleagues in these subfields causes difficulties for required course offerings and advising availability, and means that they are quite constrained in the courses they are able to teach.

Two unique strengths of the UW Linguistics department compared to their peers is the Computational Linguistics masters program and PhD track, and the ASL undergraduate program. The Computational Linguistics Masters of Science (CLMS) trains students for competitive jobs in technology, often with a goal of creating students who practice ethical and altruistic approaches to technology. The ASL faculty (Lance Forshay, Dan Mathis, Kristi Winter) have built a successful minor in ASL with 3 levels of programming that consistently has an enormous waiting list.

The focus on hiring new faculty with an experimental focus has meant that the department now hosts a number of labs, which are divided across two buildings. The labs of the newest faculty are in Smith Hall (Cheng: Neuroplasticity and Language Lab; Ferjan Ramirez: Language Development and Processing lab; Lapierre: Phonology Lab) while Guggenheim

houses the Phonetics Lab, Sociolinguistics Lab, and Treehouse (the Computational Linguistics lab). One unique aspect of some of these spaces is that they serve as resources for the broader UW community (e.g., the Phonetics lab hosts other UW researchers who wish to use the soundbooth and recording equipment, for example.) One issue that arose regarding lab management is that the addition of new labs over the past couple of years has meant that there is a more critical need for IT support. Many of the labs are running servers, maintain corpora, or need programming support to carry out online research, or simply need someone to maintain their machines. At the moment, there is no one in this role, and the previous person had difficulty appropriately dividing his time, but it is nevertheless critical to hire someone to support these facilities if their research is to thrive. On another research-related note, some faculty have found that certain university regulations have hampered their ability to carry out research, in particular, restrictions on the use of Prolific (www.prolific.co) to collect data online. Since many linguists were forced to switch to online data collection because of the pandemic, and in person data collection is still not always possible, Prolific has emerged as a reliable platform for recruiting participants online. We aren't familiar with another university that prohibits its use, which puts research in the Linguistics department at a real disadvantage at UW.

The department maintains links and collaborations between the Linguistics faculty and a number of other departments around the university, including Anthropology, Asian Languages and Literatures, Bioinformatics, Canadian Studies, Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, English, I-Labs, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Psychology, Center for Human Neuroscience, Slavic, and Speech and Hearing Science. These collaborations have led to co-authored publications for several faculty with colleagues from around the university. One area that the department could pursue more rigorously are relationships with other units engaged in the teaching and documentation of endangered languages, including Southern Lushootseed language in the Department of American Indian Studies and Inuit language through the Canadian Studies Center. While approaches to the study and teaching of endangered and minority languages differ across campus, possible collaboration involving colloquia, community outreach, graduate student study, and grant opportunities through programs such as the UW Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies as well as external sources are worth exploring. In addition, the ASL program may benefit from UW Language Learning Center resources such as video streaming services and assistance in web-based language course development.

The department has been successful in attracting funding, from sources including the CLMS program, CFR endowments, and external funding for their research. For example, several faculty have received funding from federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, and with the more recent hires of Ferjan Ramirez, Cheng and Lapierre, the grant activity of the department is sure to increase. It is clear that the department chair Richard Wright has been working very closely with Development to find opportunities for increasing endowments or attracting new donors. However, one concern of the department is that it does not currently have enough administrative support for its grant seeking and management, and that asking the other department administrators to take on grant management is an extra duty on top of their other obligations.

A particular strength of the department is that faculty, staff, and students consider it a welcoming and supportive environment. Each constituent we met with felt the department took diversity, equity, inclusion, mental health, and department climate seriously and is making concerted efforts towards improvement in these areas, such as asking about them in faculty annual reports. The recent development of a year-long professional seminar covering topics including diversity, equity, inclusion, and mental health has been an important addition in this regard. This graduate student led program hosts faculty presenters and has generated important feedback on how to improve the department community. It has led the development and department adoption of an anti-racist statement. Notwithstanding these efforts, there remain recognized needs in the department. For junior faculty, greater clarity concerning tenure and promotion guidelines would alleviate much anxiety. There also remains a need to further diversify both the graduate and undergraduate student body, the numbers which have remained stagnant over the past several years. The Committee heard from several department members that there should be more concerted effort in recruiting and retaining underrepresented minority students in the variety of Linguistics programs.

D. Graduate Program:

Since the last review, the Linguistics PhD program changed from an admissions model of accepting a large number of students to accepting only the number that they can fully fund for 5 years. This decision was in line with the funding practices of peer departments, and meant that students did not have to supplement meager departmental support with other teaching or outside positions. Previously, time-to-degree was long; unfortunately, we did not get updated information for current students, but we hope it is shorter; peer institutions generally provide guaranteed funding for 5 years and have a 5-6 year Ph.D. graduation rate.

Funding for graduate students comes from a few sources, primarily TA lines, some RA opportunities that are mostly from external faculty grants, and external graduate funding awards such as the Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships. The remainder of the funding comes from the revenue from the department's fee-based CLMS program. Though the department does try to be cognizant of the number of hours that each student works due to their funding source, there is sometimes a perception among the graduate students that those who get RA positions are being better prepared for their future as compared to those who are primarily TAs, since they may get publications out of the RA position. At the same time, not all of the graduate students have the requisite skills for the RA positions that are available, so it is not possible to allocate such positions equally across all students.

As for the progression of the students through the requirements and milestones, the department seems typical of its peers with a requirement for 2 general papers before the dissertation proposal. Required coursework consists of one course in each of the areas of phonetics, phonology, sociolinguistics, syntax, semantics, and language processing and development, and then more advanced courses decided on in consultation with the student's advisor. While this trajectory is similar to those of peer departments, there may be a unique

situation in this department because of how many students end up going into industry instead of academia. According to the self-study, in the past 10 years, 28 of 37 PhD graduates (76%) are in non-academic (non-teaching or research) positions, with a substantial proportion of those taking positions in tech or data science at companies like Amazon, Facebook, Google, Grammarly, or Microsoft. If this placement trend continues, the department may wish to determine whether the current coursework and milestones are best suited to prepare students for industry careers. For example, one student noted that the requirements did not always lend themselves toward the profile that tech companies may want to see, such as the types of publications that are more common in computational linguistics or computer science. Determining the best course of action for preparing such students is probably not straightforward, especially if they don't enter the program with the knowledge that they wish to pursue an industry path, but it may be fruitful to discuss this issue with the graduate students to determine whether any changes to the graduate program may be warranted if and when a student determines that they wish to pursue the industry path.

E. Undergraduate major and advising

One relatively big change in 2021 has been to move undergraduate advising from the department itself to Humanities Academic Services (HAS), where advising staff serve all departments in the Humanities Division. Previously, the Linguistics Department had a graduate student who served as the undergraduate adviser, meeting with students and talking through their options with them. The undergraduates that the committee spoke to who had experience with the previous graduate student advisor praised his helpfulness, and both faculty and students report that the transition to the new advising system has been a bit rocky. That said, the current advising system is very new, and it may be that there has not yet been enough time to adjust to the new system and for the HAS advisers to become thoroughly acquainted with the Linguistics department offerings. Currently, Sharon Hargus is serving as the department's associate chair, and one of her roles is to liaise with HAS. While this is an important link, the department may instead benefit from convening a curriculum committee that can keep track of the upcoming offerings over the next few quarters, and communicate with the advising office when they are aware of anything that may disrupt the normal progression, such as sabbaticals or other teaching changes. The committee can also collaborate with the advising office to provide information about substitutions in other departments when students want or need them.

The undergraduate students were asked whether they felt the content of courses has been inclusive of the diversity of experiences among students at UW. The consensus was that this is indeed the case. One highlight of the courses at UW is that discussion of ASL is incorporated into many different classes, since this is a strength of the department and many on the faculty have direct experience with ASL. In addition, the faculty have experience doing research alongside Native American and other Indigenous communities, which can be introduced in the classroom. One student noted that it could be helpful to have a course on the ethics of research, with a focus on indigenous or other sensitive communities. If these topics are not already incorporated into the existing field methods course, this might be a place to include them (perhaps advertising to potential students that this course includes such content.)

F. Review Committee Recommendations:

1. **Resources for supporting research.** One concern that arose in a number of meetings was whether Linguistics' position in the division of humanities was appropriate considering the research done in this department. There was an impression that other divisions have more resources to allocate, and that as an experimental and computational department, Linguistics may be more aligned with either the social sciences or the natural sciences. The Committee is not convinced that a move to another division would garner more resources, but we recommend that the department have a discussion with the administration of Arts and Sciences about resources available to support sponsored projects activity, including both pre-award and post-award services. These tasks should not fall to the administrators in the department, but rather should be the purview of staff that work with multiple departments across Arts and Sciences. However, it seems that the administration does not necessarily have a clear understanding of the department goals and activities regarding external funding, so there should be a meeting to explain and address this problem.
2. **Hiring goals.** In recent years, the department has wisely invested in faculty with experimental approaches to linguistics. However, in order to carry out this work, it is critical to have a proper foundation in the core subfields of linguistics. For example, researchers working on the acquisition of syntax must have a firm grounding in syntax, or researchers focused on natural language understanding must have training in semantics. At this time, the department only has one full-time syntactician (Citko) and one semanticist (Ogihara). In comparison, other peer departments often have 3-4 syntacticians and 2-3 semanticists. Thus, if the department is to compete with its peers, it is critical to increase the number of syntacticians and semanticists by at least one in each of these areas. This will also ease the teaching needs of the department, as Citko and Ogihara are compelled to teach the same courses each year to fulfill the basic requirements, and never get to offer the more advanced courses that would enhance the department.
3. **Expand courses that count for the major.** Our discussions with the undergraduates revealed that there can be a mismatch between some linguistics courses that the students would like to take and what counts for the major. For example, most 200-level courses do not count for the major, but they are among some of the most well-enrolled courses in the department. Only LING 200 Introduction to Linguistic Thought and LING 203 Introduction to Anthropological Linguistics count as courses for the introductory requirement, which means that popular courses such as LING 233 Language and Society, LING 234 Language and Diversity, LING 269 Swearing and Taboo Language, LING 212 Infant Brain and Language Development cannot be counted toward the major even as electives. Students expressed a desire for some of these exciting courses to be available for major credit, since they otherwise don't have enough space in their schedule to take these courses (especially if they're double majoring or have other

commitments). The gateway course LING 234 Language and Diversity in particular was discussed as a possibility for inclusion towards the major/minor. It is also noteworthy that these courses are offered regularly, which means that several faculty members in a semester can be assigned to courses that cannot advance students forward in the major. We recommend that the department consider if it is possible to allow students to get elective credits for the major for some 200-level courses. As part of this process, it would be prudent for the department to create a Curriculum Committee charged with analyzing and updating course offerings as well as remaining in conversation with HAS advisers for the department's undergraduates.

4. **Consider modifications of the PhD program for students not entering academia.** Given the concentration of tech jobs looking for employees with skills in computational linguistics, and the expertise of the department in this area, it appears that many graduates end up in an industry position after graduation. The department should examine whether the current progression through the PhD program is best suited for these students. The committee is aware that this is a thorny issue, since many students themselves may not know that they will end up on a non-academic trajectory until they have gotten well into the program. However, with this in mind, the faculty may wish to think about when students typically make this decision, and whether it is possible to then shift students onto a track with milestones that are more appropriate for preparing them for a non-academic career.
5. **Pursue research and teaching relationships across campus.** As part of the context of research as well as teaching, the committee recommends the department actively seek out relationships and funding opportunities with units and programs that they have not yet done so. For example, the UW Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies may support the research and teaching of endangered and minority languages, community outreach, and graduate student study. Other campus-wide opportunities include the Global Innovation Fund and study abroad, which may serve research as well as student recruitment.