In the late 1950s an Interdisciplinary Committee on Linguistics determined that a department should be established, eventually involving several linguists across campus at the University of Washington to come together to constitute the Department of Linguistics, whose inaugural year was 1962-1963. Initially staffed by several joint-appointed and adjunct faculty members, by 1970 the number had grown in rank and reputation. The academic offerings included traditional American Structuralism, historical Indo-European, Amerindian languages, and the developing theoretical disciplines of Generative syntax and phonology. The first doctorate was awarded in 1966, with four more following.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the steady growth of the Department and a deepening of its offerings in the core areas of grammatical theory. There were four full-time faculty members in 1970 and eight by 1990. The primary specialization of all of them was syntax or phonology and, after 1975, formal semantics. But from the 1990s on, the composition of the Department steadily broadened. Specialists in Romance linguistics were added in 1995, phonetics and sociolinguistics in 1998, computational linguistics in 2003, and American Sign Language in 2007. As of 2014, there are 13 tenured professors in the Department, four more full-time faculty members and about 30 adjunct faculty from a dozen departments. Despite all of the changes, the Department has maintained a continuity that is quite remarkable: in its 51 years of existence, it has seen only five chairs.

The Department has always strived to make its presence known beyond the confines of the Washington campus. Faculty members were instrumental in the founding of the Western Conference on Linguistics, the West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics, and the Northwest Linguistic Society, all of which have met regularly at the UW. Furthermore, in the past 15 years, two members of the Department have been elected President of the Linguistic Society of America, a feat that no other department can match. The Department has not ignored community service either. One faculty member works regularly with native communities in Washington and British Columbia helping to document and preserve their languages, another documents speech characteristics of the Washington dialect, while a third examines language attitudes from different parts of the state.

The growth of the department can be gauged by quantitative changes such as the following: lower division enrollment is now 1400 students annually, undergraduate majors number 130, and over 60 students received their BA in Linguistics in 2014; graduate student funding has increased from four TAships in the 1970s to 25 students supported today; grants awarded to faculty members and students: none in the 1970s to six faculty members grant-funded today. Finally, our physical environment has increased not only in size, but in location: our accommodations in 1970 were a bleak corner in the sub-basement in Padelford, but today we occupy the commodious fourth floor of Guggenheim.