WHAT DO LINGUISTS DO?

This page provides information for the public and for media wishing to interview department faculty. You will find here information about what Linguistics is, what faculty research is underway in the Department of Linguistics, and a listing of topics on which faculty may be willing to comment for media interviews. You will also find answers to Frequently Asked Questions.

WHAT IS LINGUISTICS?

In short, Linguistics is the scientific study of the human capacity for language.

"Linguistics, the study of language, concerns itself with all aspects of how people use language and what they must know in order to do so. As a universal characteristic of the species, language has always held a special fascination for human beings, and the history of linguistics as a systematic field of study goes back almost three thousand years.

Modern linguists concern themselves with many different facets of language, from the physical properties of the sound waves in utterances to the intentions of speakers towards others in conversations and the social contexts in which conversations are embedded. The branches of linguistics are concerned with how languages are structured, how languages are used, and how they change."

-- Geoff Nunberg and Tom Wasow

More about the field of Linguistics:

- The Domain of Linguistics (The Linguistic Society of America)
- The Subfields of Linguistics (The Linguistic Society of America)
- Research in linguistics

WHAT WE DO: LINGUISTICS RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

The Linguistics Department's primary areas of interest lie strongly in grammatical theory, which can be broken down roughly into syntax, phonology, and semantics. Faculty members also teach and conduct research in subfields of linguistics that interface with other physical, social, and computational sciences. These include: phonetics, sociolinguistics, computational linguistics, and second language acquisition theory.

Some of our emeriti faculty have expertise in the history of linguistics as an academic discipline, mathematical linguistics, and language typology.

Read more about recent and current research underway in UW Linguistics (alphabetized by principal investigator):

- Emily Bender, PI: Delph-in Grammar Matrix Project
- Betsy Evans, PI: Seattle to Spokane Project
- Fei Xia/Emily Bender, co-PIs: Aggregation Project
- Alicia Wassink, PI: English in the Pacific Northwest Study
- Richard Wright, PI: PHOIBLE (Phonetics Information Base and Lexicon)
Richard Wright, PI: Perceptual Adaptation to Distortion

Interdisciplinary projects:

- Mari Ostendorf/Emily Bender, co-PIs: LiCORICE Project
- Mari Ostendorf (UW Electrical Engineering)/Richard Wright/Gina Levow, co-PIs: ATAROS Project (Automatic Tagging and Recognition of Stance)
- Jeffrey Bilmes/Katrin Kirchhoff/Howard Chizeck (UW Electrical Engineering)/James Landay (UW Computer Science and Engineering)/Patricia Dowden (UW Speech and Hearing Sciences)/Richard Wright, co-PIs: The Vocal Joystick

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

HOW MANY LANGUAGES DO YOU SPEAK?

People who speak many languages are called “polyglots”. While some linguists may be polyglots, most aren’t. Linguistics is not the study of how to speak different world languages, but of the science of how human languages work, grow and change, and are represented in the mind.

CAN YOU GUESS WHERE I’M FROM BY LISTENING TO ME TALK?

Contrary to popular belief, linguists aren’t trained in dialect recognition, the skill made famous by Rex Harrison, playing the fictitious Prof. Henry Higgins from the movie “My Fair Lady”. While some phonologists, phoneticians and sociolinguists study dialect differences, and may recognize features in your accent, this isn’t part of what they do professionally. Dialectology is the field that examines regional and social dialect formation. Read more on the webpage of American Dialect Society, the premier professional organization for dialect research in North America.

IS THERE A WASHINGTON ACCENT IN ENGLISH?
DO PEOPLE IN WASHINGTON HAVE AN ACCENT?

The English spoken by European-Americans in WA is very similar to what some people call ‘general American’ English. Washingtonians generally believe they don’t have an accent in English. There are, however, a few pronunciation features that seem to be unique to Washington. Research is currently underway in the UW Linguistics department to establish what those features are.

HELPFUL LINKS

DEPARTMENT INFORMATION

- Department history
- Department statistics
- Mission statement
- Diversity Statement

PHOTOS FOR PRESS USE

- UW Linguistics’ 50th Anniversary Event | Photographs

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Below is a list of some of the activities in which UW Linguists have engaged that are a service to the public:

- World Languages Day presentations
- Hamilton Middle School Science night
- PEPS — King County Program for Early Parent Support

CONTACT US

For general press and media inquiries, please contact Linguistics Program Coordinator, linguw@uw.edu, (206)543-2046.
For questions about projects listed above, contact the relevant faculty researcher.