WHAT IS LINGUISTICS?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. In contrast to other language-related disciplines, linguistics is concerned with describing the rule-governed structures of languages, determining the extent to which these structures are universal or language-particular, positing constraints on possible linguistic structures, and explaining why there is only a fairly narrow range of possible human languages.

Linguistics is a valuable component of liberal education and is also useful as preprofessional training for individuals interested in teaching languages, in areas of rehabilitative medicine such as audiology or speech therapy, in special education, in work in computer science and artificial intelligence, in work with native peoples or with immigrant groups, or in academic disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, literature and language studies, where the contribution of linguistics is increasingly recognized.

Vocationally, linguistics can have applications wherever language itself becomes a matter of practical concern, as it does in fields ranging from education to medicine to public policy. The influence of linguistic theory is now evident virtually everywhere in language education, from the structure of a grade-school reader to a business “immersion course” in Japanese or French. It has also had far reaching effects on the way in which first- and second-language skills are taught. Linguistics has benefited from the growth of computer science, in answer both to a practical interest in developing computational systems that can deal with language in various ways, and a theoretical interest in the relation between natural and artificial languages. One result of this collaboration has been the creation of career opportunities for linguists in the private sector; another has been the creation of new degree programs and research centers aimed at integrating work in linguistics, computer science, logic, and related fields.

An undergraduate degree in Linguistics from UW also serves as preparation for graduate work in linguistics or language-related fields such as speech and hearing science or language teaching. Courses in linguistics at UW provide training in the analysis of specific languages and language families as well as in the construction of theories of possible human languages. The required coursework for the Linguistics major or minor at the University of Washington emphasizes the core areas of linguistics: syntax, phonetics, and phonology. However, a substantial number of elective classes is also required, and these provide ample room for exploration of additional areas, such as computational linguistics, language acquisition, historical linguistics, and others.

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