Brandeis University Major in Language and Linguistics:
Learning Goals
(For the 2011-12 Bulletin)

Introductory Narrative
Linguistics involves the scientific study of the nature and structure of human languages. The Brandeis Language and Linguistics major offers a dynamic approach to the field. The major's required core courses focus on the description and analysis of structures in the world's languages, in the linguistic subfields of phonetics and phonology (linguistic sounds and sound patterns), morphology (word structures), syntax (phrase and sentence structures), and semantics and pragmatics (meaning in sentence and discourse structures).

The major complements this grounding in the traditional core areas of linguistics with a set of elective courses chosen by each student, according to individual interests and academic goals. These are chosen from a diverse set of course offerings, ranging from electives in linguistics itself to language-related courses in disciplines that include anthropology, philosophy, computer science, near-eastern and Judaic studies, psychology, and neuroscience. Students can also opt to focus their elective course choices on the specific domains of the Cognitive Science of Language, Language and Society, Language and Computation, or General Linguistics.

Knowledge Goals
Students who complete the Language and Linguistics major emerge with a basic knowledge and understanding of:

• How languages are acquired when babies learn to talk; the types of knowledge that speakers have (usually without being aware of it) of their native language; the difference between languages and dialects; the descriptive (and not prescriptive) approach used in linguistics;

• The basic articulatory traits of the consonant and vowel sounds found in the world's spoken languages, and how the traits of these sounds can vary from one language to another;

• Core properties of the phonological organization of languages, including how consonants and vowels group together into syllables and larger units that can then bear stress, and form phonological words and phrases; the sorts of processes that can change sounds and sound patterns in various phonological environments, and in various languages;

• The types of patterns found in natural language word, phrase, and sentence structure, including the major word formation strategies and syntactic phenomena found in English and other languages—and how these can vary from one language to another;

• The nature of word meanings, and of how these group together to form compositional meaning in sentences; the major phenomena that appear in discourse contexts to convey pragmatic information; ways in which such meaning structures differ from language to language;
The analytic approaches and theoretical frameworks used in modern linguistics to study and model phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic data, including generative syntax and phonology, and model-theoretic semantics.

**Core Skills**

Students who complete the Language and Linguistics major emerge with the ability to:

- Transcribe English words and sentences into the International Phonetic Alphabet; identify and pronounce the sounds present in phonetic transcriptions of word or sentence data from a given language;

- Identify and clearly articulate the patterns and generalizations present in sets of sound, word, phrase, sentence, and discourse data from a given language or languages;

- Formulate reasonable next questions to ask, or identify the sort of additional examples that need to be gathered and examined, in order to fully discover the empirical generalizations present in a set of data, or to choose between competing hypotheses about a set of facts;

- Formulate well-reasoned hypotheses and analyses of the facts present in a set of linguistic data; demonstrate how well a given analysis would or would not work to fully capture the facts that it aims to explain; evaluate competing analyses as to which should be chosen as the best account available, in terms of both empirical adequacy and theoretical merits.

**Social Justice**

Language is a core defining trait of humans, and all languages are of roughly equal complexity, no matter what social status or way of life their speakers may have. Studying the organizing principles and intricate patterns at work in a wide variety of human languages imparts to students a lasting appreciation of and respect for these languages, and, by extension, for the speakers of these languages. Many linguists are also actively involved in work to document, preserve, or help revitalize endangered and dying languages—a problem that has special urgency given the large number of languages that are currently in danger of dying out by the end of this century.

**Upon Graduation**

Our students have long gone on to top linguistics PhD programs, and there are prominent linguists at universities within and outside North America who began as Brandeis linguistics undergraduates. The major is also excellent preparation for applied linguistics careers, including speech pathology and therapy, language teaching and translation, and computational linguistics applications—introduced in the major's optional Language and Computation elective focus—such as information retrieval and extraction, search engines, speech recognition and synthesis, machine translation, computer-assisted language learning, and artificial intelligence. In addition, the strong analytical reasoning skills and understanding of how English and other languages work that our majors develop provides a solid foundation for careers outside linguistics, in areas such as law, editing, publishing, technical writing, advertising, and educational testing.