What Is Linguistics?

Linguistics is the science of human language. The basic question of contemporary linguistics is how speakers manage to effortlessly speak and understand one or more languages. Linguists study the structure of language, both analytically and computationally, in the context of many different languages and genres. They also ask how children acquire the ability to use a language.

A fundamental tenet of linguistics is that the ability to learn a human language is a computational ability inherent to our species. Through these issues, linguistics intersects with child development, biology, evolutionary psychology, and computational logic. Linguists also explore the historical changes in languages over time, the role of language in culture, and the importance of language and dialect in the sense of community identity. Here, linguistics intersects with anthropology and sociology.

Linguistics also plays a growing role in technology. Since the advent of computers 60 years ago, there has been the dream of communicating with computers in natural language. This dream is gradually coming to fruition, thanks in large part to the understanding of language provided by linguistic theory.

Curriculum Overview

Students have the option of completing a major or a minor in Language and Linguistics. The major requires four core courses in linguistic theory, four electives, and one advanced course in a natural language. The minor requires three core courses and two electives. Many of the elective requirements can be fulfilled through cross-listed courses in psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and computer science. Students regularly take electives while they are taking the core courses.

Students also take courses in linguistics to supplement majors in psychology, neuroscience, computer science, modern languages, anthropology, legal studies, and education.

Research Opportunities

Advanced students are encouraged to pursue independent study courses in which they work directly with a faculty member on a topic of mutual interest. The senior honors thesis provides an opportunity to spend an entire year working on a self-chosen research topic under the guidance of a faculty member.
Career Opportunities

Students who have graduated with a degree in linguistics from Brandeis have gone into fields as diverse as computer science, law, psychology, and speech therapy. Those who have continued their academic careers in linguistics have gone to top graduate programs, and Brandeis graduates are now teaching linguistics at such institutions as Johns Hopkins University, Yale University, Cornell University, Barnard College, and Hebrew University.

Faculty

Following is a list of department faculty members and their areas of specialization:

- **James Pustejovsky, chair and undergraduate advising head**
  Artificial intelligence, computational linguistics, machine learning

- **Lotus Goldberg**
  Linguistics—specifically, theoretical syntax and the syntax-semantics interface

- **Sophia A. Malamud**
  Linguistics, formal semantics, discourse functions of syntax, game-theoretic approaches to language, mathematical properties of linguistic formalisms

- **Joan Maling**
  Linguistics, syntactic theory, historical syntax, metrics, Icelandic syntax, Korean syntax

- **Janet McIntosh**
  Linguistic anthropology, cognitive anthropology, psychological anthropology, East Africa

- **Leonard C. Muellner**
  Greek and Latin language and literature, Homeric texts, ancient poets, linguistics, mythology

- **Richard J. Parmentier**
  Semiotic anthropology, historical anthropology, material culture, language and communication, Oceania, Middle Ages, United States