



# Why major in linguistics (and what does a linguist do)?

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## What is linguistics?

If you are considering a linguistics major, you probably already know at least something about the field. However, you may find it hard to answer people who ask you, "What exactly is linguistics, and what do linguists do?" They might assume that it means that you are multilingual. And you may, in fact, be a polyglot, but that's not what this major is about. Linguistics is, broadly, the scientific study of language, and many topics are studied under this umbrella.

At the heart of linguistics is the search for the unconscious knowledge that humans have about language(s), an understanding of the structure of language, and knowledge about how languages differ from each other. What exactly do we mean by this? When you were born, you were not able to communicate with the adults around you using their language. But by the time you were five or six, you were able to produce sentences, understand jokes, make rhymes, and so on. In short, you became a fluent native speaker. All of this happened before you entered first grade! (If you studied a foreign language in high school, you know that learning a language later in life did not go nearly as smoothly or as quickly.) During those first few years of your life, you accumulated a wide range of knowledge about language.

Speakers of all languages know a lot about their languages, usually without knowing that they know it. For example, as a speaker of American English, you possess knowledge about word order: You understand that *Sarah admires the teacher* is grammatical, while *Admires Sarah teacher the* is not, and also that *The teacher admires Sarah* means something entirely different. You know that when you ask a *yes-no* question, you may reverse the order of words at the beginning of the sentence and that your voice goes up at the end of the sentence (for example, in *Are you going?*). However, if you speak French, you might add *est-ce que* at the beginning; if you speak Japanese, you probably add *ka* at the end; and if you know American Sign Language, you raise your eyebrows during the question. In addition, you understand that asking a *wh*-question (*who*, *what*, *where*, etc.) calls for a somewhat different strategy (compare the rising intonation in the ques-

tion above to the falling intonation in *Where are you going?*). You also possess knowledge about the sounds of your language, e.g. which consonants can go together in a word. You know that *slint* could be an English word, while *sbint* or *srint* could not be.

Linguists investigate how linguistic knowledge of this kind is acquired, how it interacts with other mental processes, how it varies from person to person and region to region (even within one language), and how computer programs can model this knowledge. They study how the structure of language (such as sounds or phrases) can be represented, and how different components of language interact with each other (such as intonation and meaning). Linguists work with consultants who speak different languages, search corpora, and run carefully-designed experiments to answer these questions about language. (Yes, linguistics is a science!) By now you can see that linguists may benefit by knowing multiple languages, but you can see that this is not the full extent of what a linguist does.

## What will I study as a linguistics major?

When you choose to major in linguistics, you're choosing a major that gives you insight into one of the most intriguing aspects of human knowledge and behavior and at the same time exposes you to related disciplines. Majoring in linguistics means that you will learn about many aspects of human language, including the physical properties and structure of sounds (*phonetics* and *phonology*), words (*morphology*), sentences (*syntax*), and meaning (*semantics*). It can involve looking at how languages change over time (*historical linguistics*); how they vary from situation to situation, group to group, and place to place (*sociolinguistics* and *dialectology*); how people use language in context (*pragmatics*); or how people acquire or learn language (*language acquisition*). Faculty members in linguistics programs are experts in at least one (if not several) of these subfields. Many linguists, in fact, have expertise in multiple subfields and enjoy collaborating with other linguists with different backgrounds in order to further scientific knowledge.

Linguistics programs may be organized around different aspects of linguistics. For example, a program might focus on the linguistics of a particular group of languages (like Slavic linguistics); how language is acquired and processed (*psycholinguistics*); how language relates to social and cultural issues, including language learning and teaching (*applied linguistics*); or the connections between linguistics and cognitive science. All of these programs share an interest in the unconscious knowledge that humans have about the language(s) that they know and what is possible or impossible in language.

Although linguistics programs in the United States may vary in their approach, they tend to have similar requirements. Most linguistics majors are either required or encouraged to have proficiency in at least one language besides English. This knowledge helps students understand how languages vary and how the students' native language fits into a broader picture. Many linguistics majors spend time studying and/or traveling abroad. Students are also encouraged to complement their linguistic studies with courses in related areas (such as psychology, cognitive science, anthropology, or computer science) to be more well-rounded and better informed.

## What opportunities will I have with a linguistics degree?

In the course of their training, students who major in linguistics acquire valuable intellectual skills, including analytic reasoning and argumentation, and learn how to study language scientifically. This means making insightful observations, formulating and testing clear hypotheses, making arguments and drawing conclusions, and communicating findings to a wider community. Linguistics majors are therefore well equipped for a variety of jobs and graduate-level programs.

## Job Opportunities

A linguistics major provides students with valuable training for many different kinds of opportunities following graduation. Some may require additional training or skills, but not all do. Here are just a few:

- **Work in the computer industry:** Linguists may work on speech recognition, search engines, and artificial intelligence.

- **Teach at the university level:** A graduate degree in linguistics allows you to teach in departments such as linguistics, philosophy, psychology, speech/communication sciences, anthropology, English, and foreign languages.
- **Work in education:** People with a background in linguistics and education develop curricula and materials, train teachers, and design tests and other methods of assessment, especially for language arts and second language learning. At the university level, many applied linguists are involved in teacher education and educational research.
- **Teach English as a Second Language (ESL) in the United States or abroad:** If you want to teach ESL in the US, you will probably need additional training in language pedagogy, such as a Masters degree in Education or TESOL. Many teaching positions abroad require only an undergraduate degree, but at least some specialized training in the subject will make you a much more effective teacher. Linguistics can give you a valuable cross-language perspective.
- **Work as a translator or interpreter:** Skilled translators and interpreters are needed everywhere, from government to hospitals to courts of law. For this line of work, a high level of proficiency in the relevant language(s) is necessary, and specialized training may be required. Nonetheless, linguistics can help you understand the issues that arise when a message is communicated from one language to another.
- **Work on language documentation or do fieldwork:** A number of projects and institutes around the world are looking for linguists to work with language consultants to document, analyze, and preserve languages (many of which are endangered). Some organizations engage in language-related fieldwork, including documenting endangered languages, conducting language surveys, establishing literacy programs, and translating documents of cultural heritage. This is a great way to interact with speakers of diverse languages, representing communities around the world.

- **Teach a foreign language:** Your students will benefit from your knowledge of language structure and your ability to make certain aspects of the language especially clear. You will need a high level of proficiency in the relevant language, and you may need additional training to teach a foreign language.
- **Work in the publishing industry, as a technical writer, or a journalist:** The verbal skills that linguists develop are ideal for positions in editing, publishing, and writing.
- **Work for a testing agency:** Linguists help prepare and evaluate standardized exams and conduct research on assessment issues.
- **Work with dictionaries (lexicography):** Knowledge of phonology, morphology, historical linguistics, dialectology, and sociolinguistics is key to becoming a lexicographer.
- **Become a consultant on language in professions such as law or medicine:** The subfield of forensic linguistics involves studying the language of legal texts, linguistic aspects of evidence, issues of voice identification, and so on. Law enforcement agencies such as the FBI and police departments, law firms, and the courts hire linguists for these purposes.
- **Work for a product-naming company:** Companies that name products do extensive linguistic research on the associations that people make with particular sounds and classes of sounds. A background in linguistics qualifies you for this line of work.
- **Work for the government:** The federal government hires linguists for the Foreign Service, the FBI, etc.
- **Become an actor or train actors:** Actors need training in pronunciation, intonation, and different elements of grammar in order to sound like real speakers of a language or dialect. They may even need to know how to make mistakes to sound like an authentic nonnative speaker.

To enhance your chances of finding a good job after graduation, you might choose to double-major and make your linguistic work part of an interdisciplinary

program of study. A secondary specialization in an area such as psychology, computer science, the speech sciences, education, journalism, philosophy, or a foreign language complements a linguistics major nicely.

## Beyond the Bachelor's Degree

Graduate and professional programs require students to have strong verbal and analytical skills. A linguistics major will provide you with solid preparation for such programs. These include:

- Professional programs such as law school or library/information science
- Clinical programs such as speech and language therapy
- MA and PhD programs in fields such as linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, computer science, anthropology, philosophy, communication sciences, education, and the study of particular language(s)
- TESOL programs and other programs associated with teaching English to nonnative language users

## Additional Resources

- The Linguistic Society of America:  
<http://www.lsadc.org>

General information about the field of linguistics, a directory of linguistics programs in the US, job postings, and additional resources

- The LinguistList: <http://www.linguistlist.org>

Just about any information on the field that you could possibly want, including conference listings, job postings, and links to sites for downloading phonetic fonts

- Linguistic Enterprises:  
<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/linguistics/enter>

For people with linguistics degrees seeking jobs in industry. It is geared more towards people with degrees beyond the undergraduate level but can help guide your career planning

Still curious about linguistics but are not ready to become a linguistics major? Look at an introductory textbook or even enroll in an introductory-level course in the field. Offered at many colleges and universities, these courses often satisfy distribution requirements and are always very interesting. We also encourage you to talk to a linguist! Faculty members in linguistics departments would be happy to talk with prospective students and answer questions about the major and the field.

**The Linguistic Society of America** was founded in 1924 for the advancement of the scientific study of language. The Society serves its nearly 7,000 personal and institutional members through scholarly meetings, publications, and special activities designed to advance the discipline.

The web site for the Society (<http://www.lsadc.org>) includes The Field of Linguistics (brief, nontechnical essays describing the discipline and its subfields), and statements and resolutions issued by the Society on matters such as language rights, the English-only/English-plus debate, bilingual education, and ebonics.

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