

McGill University Department of Linguistics

Should I do an Honours Degree? Some Unofficial Advice

Many students who are interested in Linguistics wonder whether they should pursue an Honours degree in the subject, or stick with a Major or Minor. Each student will have his or her own factors to consider in this decision, but a number of general concerns tend to come up for most students considering a switch to Honours. This document summarizes some of the main issues.

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

As the name implies, Honours students must meet high academic standards. In Linguistics, we do not insist on any formal entrance qualifications for Honours, but you will not graduate with an Honours degree if you do not meet these standards. First of all, you have to take twenty courses in Linguistics, amounting to 60 credits, including your six-credit Honours thesis. The courses are listed on the Linguistics Department website: <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/programs/linguistics/PROGRAMS/HONOURS.HTM>. Second, you have to maintain a GPA of 3.3 (B+) in your Linguistics courses. Third, you have to get at least a B+ in all but one of Phonetics, Phonology, Syntax and Semantics, as well as in your thesis. Students not meeting these requirements, even if they have passed all of the twenty courses, will graduate with a Major in Linguistics (providing the relevant criteria for a Major are met) rather than with an Honours degree.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: LEVEL OF INTEREST

Assuming you have the academic standing and ability to get an Honours degree, the next question is, do you want one? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing Honours? The first issue is level of interest. Obviously, pursuing an Honours degree implies that you are strongly interested in Linguistics, perhaps so much so that you are thinking seriously of going on in Linguistics at the graduate level. This specialization naturally comes at the cost of other interests you might have. The difference between an Honours degree and a Major is 24 credits, or eight classes. These are eight classes that you could take in other fields, thereby broadening your education, rather than narrowing your focus on Linguistics. On the other hand, if you are really passionate about Linguistics, the Honours degree allows you to develop that passion in a wide range of courses covering several different aspects of Linguistic science.

BENEFIT OF AN HONOURS DEGREE

The main drawback to doing Honours was just mentioned: comparatively fewer opportunities to explore other fields of knowledge. The most obvious advantage, apart from cultivating a strong interest in Linguistics, is preparation for graduate school. If you are serious about pursuing Linguistics at the graduate level, in either an M.A. or a Ph.D., the Honours degree is a good – perhaps the best -- undergraduate preparation. Even here, some graduate programs may prefer you to have a broader background in other fields, but many admissions committees will strongly value the comprehensive and thorough preparation of someone who has done twenty courses in Linguistics, including a thesis. Having written a thesis, in particular, will prepare you well for the kind of independent research you will be expected to do in a graduate program, and a positive letter of recommendation from a thesis supervisor will be a powerful aid in your applications.

LIMITS TO THE COMPARATIVE BENEFIT OF AN HONOURS DEGREE

That said, the Honours degree is more of a Canadian tradition than an American one: in the U.S., “honors” tends to mean simply a high GPA rather than a concentration of

coursework in a particular area. Thus, an Honours degree may mean more to Canadian graduate programs than to American ones.

You should also remember that there are other ways to get experience in independent research, together with a letter of recommendation from someone who has supervised that research. Many upper-level seminars require substantial research papers that are similar to an Honours thesis, if on a smaller scale; this is particularly true of a paper written for LING 488 or 489, the Independent Study courses, where the paper is normally the entire basis for your grade. A Major who has taken one or more of these courses, then, might be in a similar position to an Honours student in terms of research experience.

Finally, it should be recalled that, while graduating with Honours necessarily entails maintaining a high GPA, it does not guarantee a higher GPA than a student graduating with a Major. On the contrary, some of the highest GPAs in each year's crop of students graduating in Linguistics are held by Majors, or even Minors, rather than by Honours students.

Doing Honours, therefore, doesn't demonstrate that you're necessarily better or brighter than other students who don't do Honours; it simply implies that you know more about Linguistics. The disadvantage, as already mentioned, is that this may entail knowing less about other things. It's up to you to decide which is more important to you. Linguistics is a fascinating field of study as worthy as any other, but it's only one tiny part of the vast domain of human knowledge. If you do go on to study Linguistics in graduate school, you'll get plenty of opportunity to specialize there, whereas you won't have any further opportunities to explore other fields, at least not in a formal way. Your undergraduate degree is your last significant opportunity to broaden your knowledge of the world, before you begin deepening it in one specific area in order to begin a career.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

If you have further questions about undertaking an Honours degree in Linguistics or writing an Honours thesis, contact your (intended) supervisor or the undergraduate advisor for Linguistics, or visit the Honours page of the Linguistics Department website, at:

<http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/programs/linguistics/PROGRAMS/HONOURS.HTM>

This document was prepared by Prof. Charles Boberg in March, 2008. It does not necessarily reflect the views of McGill's Department of Linguistics. You are encouraged to speak with other faculty members and fellow students to get their views as well.