

# Linguistics at McGill

## INFORMATION FOR PROSPECTIVE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

### *What is Linguistics?*

**Linguistics is the scientific study of human language: how humans learn and use language and the properties that characterize human language around the globe.** There are many approaches to this subject, emphasizing different perspectives and scientific traditions. Three broad divisions are the following:

**Theoretical Linguistics**: the study of the structural properties of language; that is, the rules and constraints that regulate the formation and interpretation of words and sentences in the world's languages. This approach tests theoretical models of language against data from a wide range of languages spoken around the world.

**Experimental and Applied Linguistics**: the study of language in relation to a wide range of other fields of inquiry, from neuroscience and psychology, to language learning and teaching, to anthropology, geography and sociology. These approaches design experiments that investigate how humans learn or use language, or observe how language functions in a community of speakers.

**Computational Linguistics**: the study of the computational systems that underlie the way that people represent, generalize, learn, and process language. These approaches build mathematical theories and computational algorithms that model these aspects of language.

### *What courses can I take?*

The Department of Linguistics at McGill offers a wide range of courses in both of these areas, with an emphasis on the “core” areas of theoretical linguistics. The main subjects in theoretical linguistics are:

**Phonetics**: the study of the organs and sounds of human speech.

**Phonology**: the study of the sound systems of languages.

**Morphology**: the study of word structure.

**Syntax**: the study of sentence structure.

**Semantics**: the study of the meaning and interpretation of words and sentences.

You can get an introduction to all of these areas by taking **LING 201**. This is the best course to start with if you plan to pursue a Linguistics program, since it's a pre-requisite for most other courses and is required for all of our programs. Most of our program students take LING 201 in the Fall of their U1 year, then Phonetics (LING 330) and Syntax 1 (LING 371) the following winter.

In addition to the “core” courses listed above, students can take courses in the following experimental and applied areas:

**Bilingualism**: how people develop and use two grammars at once.

**Computational Linguistics**: how to model language learning and processing using computational methods.

**Dialectology**: regional differences in language, including Canadian English.

**Field Methods**: how to gather linguistic data from native speakers of a language.

**Historical Linguistics**: how languages change over time.

**Laboratory Linguistics**: how to test linguistic theories using experimental methods.

**Language Acquisition**: how people learn first and second languages.

**Natural Language Processing**: how to understand language from an engineering point of view.

**Sociolinguistics**: how language is affected by social factors like age, sex and social class.

**Speech Processing**: how listeners process the sounds of language to recognize words.

**Speech Prosody**: how intonation and word stress affect grammar and sentence processing.

**Structure of a Specific Language**: a detailed analysis of the grammar of one language.

### *Can I do more than take courses, like get involved in research?*

An especially exciting aspect of studying Linguistics at McGill is that you can become directly involved in on-going linguistic research, by taking research-oriented advanced classes or by working in one of our labs, on faculty-directed research projects, on either a paid or volunteer basis. Over the past few years, many of our undergraduate students have made significant contributions to our research and have even co-authored publications in scientific journals.

### *What programs can I follow?*

McGill offers several programs in Linguistics: a 36-credit Major Concentration; a double Major (Majors in Linguistics and some other field); an 18-credit Minor Concentration; a 60-credit Honours program; and a 36-credit Joint Honours program. The details of these programs, including course requirements and descriptions, are available on our website (see below). Linguistics also participates in the BASc program, where you can combine a program in Linguistics with a program in the Faculty of Science.

### *What do linguists do?*

From what's been said above, it should be clear that a linguist is not necessarily someone who speaks several languages, or someone who advises people on the "correct" way to speak. Rather than prescribe proper usage, linguists describe and explain the structure of languages. By examining data from a wide range of languages spoken all over the world, **they develop theories that can explain how humans learn and use language.** Most linguists have doctoral degrees and work in academic positions at universities, though some work for government or industry.

### *What can I do with a Linguistics degree, other than be a linguist?*

Like most subjects in Arts and Science, Linguistics is not primarily a career-training program: there are relatively few jobs for which an undergraduate degree in Linguistics is the main qualification. However, a background in Linguistics can be combined with other specializations as preparation for a number of careers. Linguistics and Psychology are the typical undergraduate preparation for a graduate program in **Speech Language Pathology** (helping people with **communication disorders**). Computational Linguistics can lead to a job in the **Speech Technology** industry working with software engineers on speech or voice recognition or speech synthesis (interfaces between computers and human language) or **Natural Language Processing** companies like Google and Amazon on language understanding applications like question answering and machine translation. Linguistics and Education, Languages or Literature can prepare you for **Language Teaching or Translation**. Linguistics graduates also make contributions in language documentation and revitalization, language planning, editing, forensics (criminal investigation), journalism and advertising.

### *Where can I get more information?*

Check out our website: <http://www.mcgill.ca/linguistics/undergraduate> or call us at 514-398-4222.

For general information on Linguistics, look up the Linguistic Society of America <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/>

For **undergraduate advising**, contact Prof. Junko Shimoyama at [junko.shimoyama@mcgill.ca](mailto:junko.shimoyama@mcgill.ca)