Jessica Larsen
Graduate Student Spotlight

Jessica Larsen, a graduate student in her second semester of the MA program, considers herself “either a philosopher in a love affair with science or a scientist in a love affair with philosophy” and hopes to uncover some clues as to which by the end of the semester. This description of herself is based on her love of the philosophy of linguistics and language, as well as linguistic cognition and its various elements. She explains that, so far, her favorite linguistics class was “probably Language and Cognition, which explored the philosophical lines of inquiry that have helped shape the field of modern linguistics… I’m interested in how perception gives rise to meaning, and how linguistic cognition relates to other forms of cognition.”

Jessica’s interest in this area of linguistics is perhaps entrenched in her experiences as an English undergraduate. She took a class on conceptual poetry, which she describes as a “blurred-genre” approach to writing that focused on process-oriented, so-called ‘uncreative’ texts. “The class got me really thinking about the relationship between language and idea or thought, and I began to wonder a lot about how linguistic meaning is represented and accessed in the mind. The decision to pursue linguistics became obvious.”

Her first linguistics classes only deepened her interest in language and perception, especially Intro to the Study of Language. “I remember being very struck by the fact that no two speech sounds are ever identical, and by the fact that the auditory perceptual system develops a specialized sensitivity to the sounds of one’s native language.” As she has continued in her studies, her interests have come to include computational as well as historical linguistics, and as she zeroes in on the focus of her thesis, the category of semantics and its interface between syntax has also come into play. In keeping up with her original interests, however, she continues to be attracted to the perception of language, and “how certain expectations or experiences might influence language perception and processing, as in, for example, something like the Ganong effect.”

Jessica plans to continue to a PhD program in linguistics and possibly philosophy in the near future. Her experience with linguistics has helped her
Dursun Altinok
Graduate Student Spotlight

Dursun Altinok was bitten by the linguistics bug during his introduction to linguistics courses taken as an undergraduate. As a lover of crossword puzzles, he thoroughly enjoyed his homework, which consisted of many linguistics problem sets, making him feel as if he were constantly solving language riddles. Still, he did not think he would pursue linguistics as a career. It wasn’t until he was encouraged by a great syntactician in the department to take a syntax course that he realized, “That’s it! This is fascinating!” and claims that he was “charmed by the basics of syntactic theory.” Dursun came to the University of Utah to become a syntactician, and his mind has not been changed. “Since my Intro to Syntax class, all I want to do is syntax. I came here to be a syntactician and I still want to be one. I find other sub-fields quite fascinating to read and learn but as a profession, I would like to do research on syntactic theory.”

One of the things he finds most interesting about linguistics is its conclusiveness. He says that, “the field itself is enormous, yet all arguments follow from logical thinking and they come to a conclusion (whether it is correct or false). I do not like spending hours on an argument and in the end saying, ‘Well, this is probably individual differences.’ The kind of framework I study is conclusive and precise. The argument that you make either supports a specific theory or refutes it. That is what I like most about linguistics.”

Despite this vastness of the field of linguistics, its sub-fields are all intertwined, something Dursun was surprised to learn. “The same topic can be investigated by different sub-fields of linguistics and each of them might present a different analysis. A certain construction can be accounted by morphology, syntax, and semantics (or interfaces between them) in a different way and they all might come up with a plausible analysis. This is something I did not expect before. When I started linguistics, I was thinking that all sound stuff goes with phonology, all structures interest syntax, meaning is investigated by semantics, etc.”

Dursun has had his hands in many projects, and boasts a variety of experience. He has assisted a former professor in the establishment of a Turkish corpus for which he transcribed recordings into writing using the transcription program EXMARaLDA. For the University of Utah he has written course requirement papers, studied the Mirror Principle and its violations for syntax, and made an analysis of emphatic reduplication constructions in Turkish using OT framework for phonology. He plans to continue his research in the theoretical vein, his ideal setting being a comfortable chair, his intellect, and a cocktail within reach. “Unfortunatel-y,” he says, “that’s not how it works.” And when he feels confident about it, he would like to participate in more experimental research.

According to Dursun, linguistics has enhanced many aspects of his observation. Not only have his studies been affected, but the way he goes about experiencing life as well. “The way we look at linguistics and the way of scientific thinking has helped me to improve my perception. I have realized that I am including these scientific thinking properties into my daily life as well. I believe linguistics has enriched the way I perceive the world.”
Sean Taylor

Undergraduate Student Spotlight

Sean Taylor is an undergraduate student who has found the kind of solace and enjoyment that comes from being part of a captivating community of people who share the same linguistic interests and passions that he enjoys. He is the current president of the University of Utah's Linguistics Club for Undergrads (LCU), and has spearheaded this responsibility with incredible enthusiasm and ability, bringing linguists together into a fun and uplifting environment both in and out of the classroom.

Sean's interests in linguistics currently lie in orthography and phonology, something he was excited to learn about in Aaron Kaplan's introductory course, exclaiming that “I could happily spend all day on phonology problem sets.” As he continued with his classes, he was made more and more aware of the amount of work that linguists have ahead of them. He says, “I’m consistently surprised at how much we don’t know and how much research there still is to do. A lot of the basics of linguistics are still being debated and rebuilt. It's inspiring to know there’s still a lot left for linguists to figure out.”

Because of his interest in orthography, Sean is delving into some languages based on their writing systems. He is learning Korean hangul, and is planning to further explore with Japanese kana and Mongolian script. He also enjoys learning about different methods of transcription, such as IPA, X-SAMPA, and Americanist notation (APA). When researching, he prefers to read up on typological research and descriptive grammars as a means of developing a system for understanding languages and language families. “Examining what makes languages similar and at the same time unique is endlessly interesting.”

Through Sean’s activity as LCU president, he and the other members have been assisting Professor Kaplan with his rhyme corpus project, as well as Professor Csirmaz with her Epistemic Containment Principle project. As he continues to lead LCU forward, he also mentions another project on the horizon that he is hoping to start up in the next couple semesters. Where his personal future is concerned, however, he says that he is interested in language documentation and revitalization, and intends to focus on this subject as a graduate student. He would also like to research sign language, as well as the Utah dialect and heritage speakers of other languages in Utah. He looks forward to conducting his own research and learning about field work, and has applied to CoLang this summer as a means of strengthening his understanding of this subject.

Sean's time so far at the University of Utah has been very valuable to him, and the exceptional group of established and aspiring linguists alike has proven to be especially positive. "Finding a large group of people who share the passion of linguistics has been very helpful in my time in college. It’s almost surreal sometimes that other people are excited to talk about palatalization in Korean or the effect of English bilingualism on the case systems of other languages."
Staff Profile
Heather Burkhart

Where were you born? I was born and raised right here in Salt Lake City, Utah.

What is your field of study? I actually graduated from linguistics! I’m planning on further pursuing public relations as a writer.

What do you do for the Linguistics Department? I’m the executive secretary for the department, so I deal a lot with serving the linguistics community here at the U. I also maintain the department’s website and create the flyers, newsletters, emails and brochures that we produce.

What are your hobbies? I have always been an avid reader, and also love writing, photography, knitting, and anything outdoors. I’m a national park enthusiast!

What’s your favorite food? I have a special place in my heart for good old fashioned pizza. I also love coconut, bacon, and a respectable grilled cheese sandwich.


Where is your favorite place to visit? I will never get enough of the English countryside; however I also love adventuring right here in the various Utah wildernesses. It’s a fantastic variety you don’t see everywhere!

What’s your favorite thing about the Linguistics Department? I absolutely love that I get to have a hand in helping linguistics students achieve their goals and build up this awesome community. It’s a great group of people and I’m very pleased to be able to be part of it.

Events Calendar

Research & Community Events
3:30pm in LNCO 2110

March 3, 2016
Allard Jongman Colloquium Talk

March 24, 2016
Dave Kush Colloquium Talk

University of Utah Student Conference in Linguistics
Friday, April 8, 2016

West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics
April 29-May 1, 2016

For more information, or to be added to the Ling email list, please contact us at 801-581-8047 or linguistics@utah.edu