Bradley Gilpin
Linguistics Alum Spotlight

While an undergraduate in pre-med at the U with the full intention to become a doctor, I chose to take an Introduction to Linguistics course to fulfill my Humanities requirements. I have always had an interest in languages and was exposed to students of many diverse cultural and language backgrounds through my father’s position as graduate student advisor in Mechanical Engineering at Cal State University, Long Beach. However, I never dreamed of going into teaching or education. After the first hour of the intro to Linguistics course, I was hooked.

Long story short, I changed my major to Linguistics. While in my undergrad Linguistics program, I began tutoring International TAs through the ELI at the U. Tutoring internationals was my dream job. At that point, I decided to change my Linguistics degree to TESOL. After graduation, I got married and went to Taiwan for 6 months to teach English. I cut my time there short in order to come back to the U for an MA in Linguistics. While in my MA program, I taught at a non-profit, a private language school, and at ELI. After graduation, my wife and I moved back to California, where I am from, and I immediately found several part-time jobs teaching ESL at the local community colleges and at UC Irvine.

After 2 years of part-time teaching, I applied for and got a full-time teaching position in ESL at UC Irvine’s International Program. Over the years, I have transitioned from teacher to Academic Coordinator, and now to Assistant Director in charge of ESL and teacher-training programs. I also get to travel to many countries around the world promoting our programs to prospective students. What more could anyone want from a job! All of my success has been a direct result of my MA in Linguistics at the University of Utah, and that first Introduction to Linguistics course that I took 20 years ago.
Khinaliq

Khinaliq is, quite literally, the end of the road. Isolated in the Caucasus Mountains of Azerbaijan, Khinaliq was cut off from the rest of the world for centuries. Nestled in its protective barrier of mountains, the town has remained relatively unaffected by the wars and conflict that have plagued its neighbors. Thus has its language, Khinalug, been preserved and perpetuated from ancient times till now. In fact, the greatest threat Khinalug has faced in its history only happened ten years ago. The Azerbaijani government built a good road connecting Khinaliq with the nearest large town, Quba, and now Khinalug and the culture built on it are on their own road to extinction.

For Tamrika Khvtisiashvili, going to Khinaliq is almost like going home. A native of Georgia who immigrated to the United States at the age of 16, Khvtisiashvili feels a personal connection with the Caucasus nations. Now, she is returning to the region as a linguist doing valuable research to preserve a dying language. Working with the leaders of Khinaliq, Khvtisiashvili is creating a grammar of Khinalug for the people of Khinaliq to use in preserving their language. Funded by a Volkswagen Foundation Grant and an NSF Grant, Khvtisiashvili and her colleagues are in the second of three years of work on the project.

Khvtisiashvili’s journey to Khinaliq began years ago in Georgia. “Georgians take lots of pride in their language,” Khvtisiashvili commented. She remembers as a child hearing adults talk about how Georgian was dying out, and she wondered what that could mean. She did not realize at that time that she would eventually come to work in the field of language preservation and revitalization.

At university, Khvtisiashvili first studied film, obtaining her Bachelor’s Degree in Art. After graduating, she and her husband opened the Blue Plate Diner in Salt Lake City. Before long, a couple began coming to the diner and struck up a friendship with Khvtisiashvili. That couple was Adrian Palmer and Mary Ann Christison, two Linguistics professors at the University of Utah. They started chatting with Khvtisiashvili about what they taught and researched, and Khvtisiashvili found herself getting interested. The following summer, Khvtisiashvili took an intro to Linguistics class and found that she loved it. “I thought it was the most interesting thing,” she recalls.
Not long afterward, Khvtisiashvili applied to the PhD Program in the Department of Linguistics and was accepted. Right away, she met and studied under Lyle Campbell, whose research focused on language revitalization. Khvtisiashvili speculates that her background in documentary film and her Georgian roots gave her a heightened appreciation for and interest in the challenge of studying small, indigenous language groups in order to preserve endangered languages.

After a period of studying and working at the University, Khvtisiashvili was ready to go out and experience fieldwork. She originally set her sights on working in Brazil with a fellow student, but a few of her mentors pointed out that she had a natural advantage in that she already spoke Russian and Georgian in addition to English. This opened up the possibility for her to work effectively in the under-studied Caucasus region. Khvtisiashvili says that she struggled with the decision because she knew no one working in the Caucasus, whereas, if she worked in Brazil, she would be among friends.

The deciding factor came when Khvtisiashvili attended LSI classes at Stanford University over the summer and met Professor Alice Harris, a renowned Caucasiologist. Harris taught a class about the structure of language in Caucasus, and Khvtisiashvili made up her mind that her fieldwork should take her East rather than South. She was able to get a position as research assistant to Harris and accompanied her to Azerbaijan, where Harris was researching class markers in the regional languages. Khvtisiashvili describes Harris as “highly influential” in her development as a linguist because she got to watch Harris do fieldwork. It was in Harris’s company that Khvtisiashvili first visited Khinaliq. After only a two-week stay, Khvtisiashvili “fell in love” with the remote town.

Khinalug is a scantily researched language; the only scholarship on it had been done by Russian linguists in the 1960s. Khvtisiashvili and her research partner Monika Rind-Pawlowski are striving to expand the body of study on Khinalug through creation of a grammar of the language and a study of the cultural and historical linguistic borrowing of Khinalug. Their goal is to provide the inhabitants of Khinaliq with the tools to perpetuate their language through future generations and cultural change. However, what the citizens of Khinaliq do with those tools is a choice that Khvtisiashvili realizes she must leave up to them.

“It’s a hot place to be,” Khvtisiashvili commented. She feels a “constant conflict” because the values of the Khinaliq are contrary to some of her personal beliefs and values. The changes that threaten to encroach on Khinaliq could mean the end of a language, but also the end of the suppression of women. Thus, Khvtisiashvili must walk the fine line of neutrality, endeavoring to record and preserve an endangered language without influencing the course of events that will affect what changes come to Khinaliq.
If someone taught you that the word to the left is pronounced \([\text{kafu}]\) and means *nail*, do you think you would recognize the spelling later? Would it help you remember how to pronounce it?

These questions and others formed the basis of Catherine Showalter’s work in the Speech Acquisition Lab at the University of Utah. Her research fueled her thesis, which she successfully defended, graduating from the University of Utah last May. Showalter’s thesis looks at how a novel orthographic script influences how learners perceive the sounds of words.

While earning her Bachelor’s degree in Speech Pathology with a Linguistics minor from the University of Minnesota, Showalter started feeling that she did not want to end up doing clinic work all her life, so she began the search for a university with a solid Linguistics program. Drawn by the Speech Lab and the adventure of new experiences in an unfamiliar place, Showalter eventually decided on the University of Utah. Arriving in Utah in 2010, Showalter knew she had an interest in Phonology, but she was not quite sure what she wanted to do with it. Never one to sit around and wait for something to come along, Showalter immediately set to work, taking up an abandoned project in the lab and running with it. The research had to do with orthography, the written form of words, and it helped shape the thesis Showalter eventually chose.

Her initial experiments involved giving learners the written form of an Arabic non-word along with a picture of the meaning and the sound of the non-word. Learners were then split into two groups. The first group was shown the picture of the non-word and heard a sound, then asked if the non-words were a match. The second group received the written form of the non-word and heard a sound, again, to see if they could match the non-words with the correct sounds. The questions Showalter was studying were two-fold: 1. Had the learners actually learned the sounds, and 2. Had they learned the written forms of the non-words?

As it turned out, learners were unable to perceive the contrast in the sounds of the non-words, which hindered their ability to match sound to picture or orthographic form. But, while the research showed no significant interactions between orthography and phonological perception, Showalter is not discouraged. She is currently organizing a follow-up experiment with perceptually easier contrasts and different parameters to check her findings.

Showalter is continuing her research at the University of Indiana, where she is beginning the PhD program this fall. Indiana has a whole department dedicated to the study of second language acquisition, and Showalter is very excited to be working in an environment so completely conducive to her interests and research. In parting with the Department of Linguistics, Showalter had a word for Linguistics students who are just starting down their own academic paths. “Don’t rush through school,” she counseled. “Enjoy the studies you’re doing and do a good job. Be sure to take advantage of all of the academic opportunities that come your way.”
Jessica Blake
Undergraduate Student Spotlight

“Linguistics is more of a hard science than you’d think,” says Jessica Blake, a recent graduate of the Department of Linguistics. “It’s more narrowly focused than an English degree anyway.”

Blake would know, too. Having started at the University of Utah with the goal of becoming an editor, she originally declared herself in an English major, but soon got frustrated with how interpretive the material could be.

“I wanted there to be one right answer,” she remembers. Then Blake took Randall Eggert’s Intro to Linguistics class and found her answer. Here, she thought, is a hard science with one right answer. Immediately switching to Theoretical Linguistics, Blake immersed herself in the field.

“I started taking my notes in all my classes in IPA to practice,” Blake recalls. “I really liked Phonology and enjoyed Aaron Kaplan’s class.” Blake excelled in her classes, maintaining a Dean’s list GPA for all 4 years of college and earning several scholarships over her academic career.

The whole time Blake was learning the finer points of Linguistics, she was practicing the art of editing with the University of Utah newspaper, The Daily Utah Chronicle. Beginning as a reporter the summer before her freshman year, Blake soon moved into copy editing and stayed there for three years, gaining experience and learning the ropes. Her chance to shine came up at the beginning of her senior year, when the managing editor position opened up. Blake endured a rigorous interview process, and was eventually selected as managing editor. Her editing experience and Linguistic training made her highly marketable and she graduated with a job already secured.

Last May, Blake graduated from the U and immediately moved to Phoenix to become an editor for Gannett. She loves her job and quickly adapted to life in a new city. But she does have one key difference with her fellow editors.

“It kind of bothers me that everyone in editing is prescriptivist,” Blake says. “I am usually descriptivist. I like to look at what is used, not tell people what to do.” According to her, one does not have to be a prescriptivist to edit well. It’s all about finding things to fix that clarify the story in ways that readers understand rather than getting nitpicky about obscure little grammar rules. Perhaps through her conversations with her coworkers, Blake may be able to bring a more descriptivist attitude to the field of editing.

Congratulations Graduates!
Spring 2012 Undergraduates
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Jeffrey Monroe Marsha Morales
Arthur M. Rasmussen Fredrik Richardson
Ruth Robertson Nicholas Toler

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Shoshoni Geminate Consonants: Description and Analysis
Robert “Gene” Deal

Shoshoni (AI): A Historical and Dialectal Perspective
Jennifer Mitchell

Spring 2012 PhD Dissertations
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