Michelle Hoefnagel
Linguistics Alum Spotlight

“Shell, I know what you will be studying.”
These are the words Michelle Hoefnagel’s brother spoke to her after attending a lecture given by a linguistics student. Michelle had never heard of linguistics, but soon fell in love upon researching it. It turned out that her brother would be right. Now a speech-language pathologist, Michelle uses her education in linguistics every day in order to help people speak after they have lost the ability to do so because of stroke, brain injury, or neurodegenerative disease.
Michelle took her intro to phonetics and syntax classes prior to taking intro to linguistics, so she felt a little out of place and somewhat behind her other classmates. Having a supportive and understanding professor helped her to quickly get ahead of the curve and feel comfortable with the coursework. She believes that the extra work and effort that she put into these first classes paid off during the remainder of her studies.
For Michelle, learning the intricacies and nuances of language and the necessity for clear and comprehensible communication was one of the most interesting things about linguistics. Upon coming into the field, she says, “I did not expect to learn how to diagram sentences with such skill as to show possible ambiguous meaning to the sentence: There was a one eyed, one horned flying purple people eater”.

Share your experience!

Our alumni spotlights focus on people just like you; diligent go-getters who have worked, found, and sometimes stumbled their way into jobs they love.

Whether you ended up in a linguistics career or built a different road for yourself, we would love to hear and share your story.

Send us your experience at linguistics@utah.edu
If you have questions, please call 801-581-8047
Using linguistics in the real world may be of concern to some students, but there are many opportunities that may not be as straightforward as speech recognition or language acquisition. Michelle was able to use her linguistic experience while she was working with trademarks as a legal secretary, her knowledge of phonology assisting in protecting intellectual property. Thanks to the Maximum Onset Principle, they were able to win rights to a certain trademark.

Aphasia, a disorder that affects language production and perception due to trauma to certain parts of the brain, is a topic that Michelle has spent much of her time studying. One of her favorite subjects of study has been examining complexities in syntax and how they impact language comprehension in people who suffer from aphasia. To aid in aphasia research, Michelle worked as a volunteer under Dr. Julie Wambaugh to create semantic feature charts for the Aphasia Research Lab for the VA Hospital. In her present career as a speech-language pathologist, Michelle works with aphasia patients every day. She believes that there is a beneficial link between the theoretical field of linguistics that can be specifically applied to speech pathology. She expresses the necessity of linguistics in what she does, saying that “My knowledge of syntax is invaluable at helping alter the complexity of information to help people with comprehension and expression of language.”

Cole Brendel
**Graduate Student Spotlight**

Formulating complex calculations is no easy task – yet we do it all the time, and we do it seamlessly. This is what fascinated graduate student Cole Brendel when he took his required introduction to linguistics course, and is also what helped him decide to change his major after only two weeks. Looking at language from a different perspective than his previous English major, Cole unexpectedly discovered that words are not separated in speech, but are broken up in our heads as we are processing sentences. Cole harbors a love for natural language processing as a result, and is a true syntactician at heart. It’s possible that truer words were never spoken when he said that you either really like syntax or you don’t at all. His favorite classes so far have been Syntax II because he was able to research various articles and see many perspectives on different issues in linguistics, and semantics following suit.

Cole believes both experimental and theoretical research will give the necessary insights for an adequate theory of scope. For his PhD dissertation he is researching interactions with quantifiers in syntax, such as the constraints that are associated with sentences like “A boy loves every girl” and how people interact with them. Cole presented his research “Complex Predeterminers in English” in Canada for the MOTH 2015 Syntax Workshop this past March. After graduating he is hoping to become a professor or perhaps work with natural language processing.

Cole has linguistics to thank for a lot of what he learned in computer science. He was able to learn how to use computational methods for linguistics, and assisted one of his professors who created a language. The professor sent his file to Cole, who was able to detect things like number and relative frequency of words and phonemes through his programming. Of his experience he said “It was probably really ugly to a computer scientist, but really cool for me as a linguist.”

For anyone thinking of going to grad school in linguistics, Cole urges you to research the department; look at the professors to see if they complement the work you want to do, and make sure you know exactly what that is. After all, you’re going to spend a lot of time with it. “This is like a job,” Cole says. “You’re going to have to work.”
What originally interested Myke Brinkerhoff in linguistics was his love of languages as a child. After studying Hebrew and Latin during his younger years, Myke ended up serving a two-year mission in Germany, which enhanced his awareness of the different cultures throughout the world and their linguistic characteristics. He found himself wondering, “There are so many different people all over the world; how are they all connected?”

While taking his generals, Myke was always interested in linguistics. He loved the syntax aspect of the intro class, saying that it looked fun parsing sentences and drawing trees. His favorite class so far has been phonology, and he has been continuing to study phonological aspects in his personal and academic research. Something that has stuck out to him during his time here is how interconnected linguistics is with other fields and disciplines. He says he wasn’t expecting to learn so much about neurology, philosophy, psychology, and computers, and has been grateful for the aspect of diversity it has given him.

Myke has been fascinated with Italian gemination, and has made it the focus of some of his research, including the topic of his presentation at the 2015 University of Utah Student Conference in Linguistics. He is looking into the possibility of backwards gemination in Italian, but has hit some roadblocks because of the lack of information available.

He is currently looking into languages that have similar characteristics for reference and ideas. Myke plans to continue his focus on phonology, and possibly experiment with language documentation. He would like to explore Ladin, a Rhaeto-Romance language spoken by about 30,000 people in Italy, but encounters the same difficulties as with Italian gemination: there are simply not enough linguistic resources yet. He plans to apply to graduate school, his first choice being UT Austin followed by Yale and UMass.

Linguistics has helped Myke be more tolerant toward the differences we face as a world full of varying culture, both linguistic and social. He says, “I want to understand them from their world view.” He advises students considering linguistics to “try it out – take a few classes ... Go to colloquiums so you can actually see what it’s like to be a linguist. Having a background in linguistics, you can do whatever you want in life.”

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Staff Profile
Genevieve Dubois

As both a graduate student in Public Administration and an academic advisor for the Linguistics Department, Genevieve Dubois tends to have her hands full. That doesn’t stop her from putting everything she’s got into what she does, however. Genevieve has held many positions within the department, and has been quite an asset to all who call linguistics home. Beginning as a work-study in 2010, Genevieve developed an interest in the ESL (now EAS) Program, which consequently led to her position as Executive Secretary. As the Global Pathways Program continued to grow and flourish, Genevieve was able to increase her knowledge of its specifics, and began participating in academic advising. After a coworker left on maternity leave, Genevieve took on more responsibilities in advising, and has continued to support the linguistics students in this manner ever since. She currently advises the linguistics undergraduate students.

Genevieve enjoys Zumba and cooking, and absolutely loves avocados and potatoes! She was born in Lima, Peru, is an avid traveler, and can’t name just one favorite destination spot. Her favorite book is “Love in the Time of Cholera” by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. When asked what she loves most about linguistics, she said, “My favorite thing about the Department of Linguistics is the faculty, staff and students. I love the people I work with!”

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