STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE:
LINGUISTICS

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Over the last 30 years, the Department of Linguistics has grown dramatically, expanding its majors and professional development for students and adopting an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to research.

The fourth floor of the Joseph F. Smith Building is home to several mainstays of the College of Humanities: the Departments of English, Philosophy, and Linguistics, as well as the dean’s office. The hallways are lined with scholars’ offices, conference meeting rooms, and alcoves where students study (or nap). However, nestled between office spaces on the south-side hallway, visitors will find something that may seem incongruous: the Functional Near-Infrared Spectroscopy lab, easy to miss while walking down the hallway. The only thing to distinguish it from the surrounding offices is that its plaque bears not the name of a scholar but the acronym fNIRS. Inside the lab is equipment for analyzing brainwaves: helmets with attached electrodes, bulky computers, real-time graphs of brain activity flitting across monitor screens.

At first glance the lab might seem a little out of place in the College of Humanities. One might expect it would fit better in neuroscience or psychology (or, for that matter, a science fiction novel). But the location of the lab is no mistake. It belongs, in fact, to the Department of Linguistics. (“Neurolinguistics Language Sciences Lab,” the subtitle on the plaque reads.) Faculty use the lab to study brain activity and language in their research on neurolinguistics and language acquisition.

This inconspicuous lab represents the Department of Linguistics as a whole quite well: it sits firmly within the College yet utilizes methods that extend beyond traditional notions of the humanities. This variety of approaches to humanistic questions opens the door to an especially broad range of scholarly work and teaching in the department. As Professor Janis Nuckolls (Anthropological Linguistics) recently said, “I would characterize linguistics as the scientific and humanistic study of language in all of its possible dimensions.”

LINGUISTICS AT BYU: A BRIEF HISTORY

Linguistics began at BYU in 1965 as a program within the English Department before becoming its own department in 1972. Since then, it has undergone several reorganizations and title changes—most recently, in 2018, going from the Department of Linguistics and the English Language to the Department of Linguistics as we now know it. Since the beginning, linguistics offered students the opportunity to study the sounds, structure, history, and acquisition of language in a systematic way.

Over the last couple decades, the department has continued to add and adjust majors in a desire to better serve students. The department introduced a second major—the English language major (not to be confused with the English major)—as a way to study the English language through a linguistics lens. In 2022 the department restructured and retitled this major, calling it applied English linguistics, to provide students with a more customizable yet focused experience.

“The idea was to breathe new life into the major,” says Nuckolls, “with a new title, new emphases, and different foci to make it more appealing to a broader range of students.” Now the major allows students to focus on four different emphases of linguistics: linguistic computing, language acquisition, language in history, and language in society.
Faculty regularly meet with students to help them plan and customize their studies. Associate Professor Wendy Baker-Smemoe (First and Second Language Acquisition) adds, “We focus on helping students with their research and with their projects as well.” Further, the department has always been closely involved with TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and other language courses at BYU. As faculty realized, BYU’s unique student body offered perfect opportunities for research on language teaching and acquisition. Baker-Smemoe says, “We have such perfect subjects here at BYU who have served these missions in these interesting places, so we can ask questions about languages that other departments can’t.” Shared interests in acquiring languages forged continuing bonds between the department and the College’s English Language Center and the Center for Language Studies, as well as other departments and centers that teach a spectrum of languages. The department accordingly introduced a TESOL MA and a TESOL minor for students looking to work in the booming English language teaching industry.

THE EDITING AND PUBLISHING MAJOR
As department faculty evaluated the professional needs of their students, they identified another significant opportunity—the ever-growing need for professionally trained, skilled editors. Professor Don Chapman (History of the English Language) says, “We’ve been trying an experiment for the last twenty years, more intensely in the last five years, and that is to have editing in linguistics.”

The integration of editing into linguistics is an experiment perhaps because of how interdisciplinary editing is. Some might see editing as naturally fitting into the Department of English or the School of Communications. But faculty realized that approaching editing from a linguistic standpoint made a lot of sense. “We recognize not just the value but also the essential nature of linguistic language to talk about editing,” explains Associate Professor Jacob Rawlins (Editing and Publishing). Editing courses aimed to give students a professional training based on a foundation of formal linguistic principles. And it turned out that the two approaches to language—the professional and the theoretical—worked together harmoniously. Studying editing from a linguistic perspective produced students who “want to be able to think and contribute and to think more broadly about language issues as editors,” says Department Chair Dan Dewey (Language Acquisition).

Since the formation of the editing and publishing major in 2018, faculty have continued to bolster the curriculum and teaching strength. As students have flocked to the major, the field has evolved into a subject of scholarship in its own right at BYU. Rawlins says, “The people we’ve hired and the collaborations we have within our department allow us to develop editing and publishing as a full discipline, rather than just a professional application of linguistics.”

Now with over 200 students in the major and 70 students in the minor, editing in the department continues to bear great fruit.

1,000 WAYS TO BE A LINGUIST
A broad survey of the department opens our eyes to the many areas that the Department of Linguistics covers at BYU—from the theoretical to the applied to the professional. “There are 1,000 ways of being a linguist if you take linguistic classes here at BYU,” Nuckolls says. “We have a broad brushstroke by which we approach language—whether it’s poetic language, whether it’s computational linguistic data, whether it’s structural linguistics, whether it’s editing and publishing. We have broad brushstrokes.”

These broad brushstrokes lend themselves to faculty research and teaching in a variety of areas and collaborations aplenty. For example, Nuckolls’ specialty is anthropological linguistics: she studies the Kichwa language in Ecuador to better understand the culture and customs of its aboriginal speakers. Where Nuckolls takes an anthropological approach, Assistant Professor Jeffrey Green (Sentence Processing, Language Acquisition) and Dewey take a neurological approach to studying language: they are the primary users of the aforementioned fNIRS lab. But these
differing approaches to language proved complementary as Nuckolls, Green, and Dewey collaborated on a neuroimaging project of Kichwa speakers during a recent study abroad trip to Ecuador; they used their seemingly disparate modes of research to a common end of understanding these unique people through their language.

Another area of emphasis in the department is computational linguistics—a rather different approach to language, though one in which the department has a strong legacy. BYU is especially recognized in the arena of corpus linguistics—the computational analysis of large, digitized bodies of text sourced from the real world called corpora. The field offers diverse opportunities for research and almost innumerable applications, from the creation of dictionaries to the interpretation of laws to studying patterns in language learners’ writing. Following are some examples of the research being performed with corpus linguistics: Associate Professor Deryle Lonsdale (Morphology, Formal Syntax, and Semantics) recently collaborated with Professor Yvon LeBras (French Language and Culture) to create a frequency dictionary of French based on a 23-million-word corpus; Assistant Professor Brett Hashimoto (Corpus Linguistics) uses corpus linguistics to answer questions about legal language in collaboration with the J. Reuben Clark Law School; Professor Earl Brown (Language Variation in Spanish and English) uses spoken-language corpora to investigate language variation in Spanish speakers.

Corpus linguistics and neurolinguistics are just a sample of the sort of cutting-edge research that goes on in the department. Faculty are increasingly willing to embrace these sorts of novel methods, but these technological approaches still balance comfortably against the theoretical studies we more readily associate with typical linguistics. For all the 1,000 ways to be a linguist, all aspects of linguistics scholarship have common threads: “Rules and systematicity—really that’s what linguistics is about. Understanding the systematicity of language,” says Dewey.

LINGUISTICS’ ONGOING AND FUTURE ROLE AT BYU
Differing methodologies in studying language, varied research tools, and diverse faculty specialties do not prevent collaboration within the department. In fact, they bolster opportunities for collaboration inside and outside the department.

Baker-Smemoe emphasizes that collaboration is frequent and productive: “If you ask somebody about their research in the department, by the end of that conversation you have a study you’re going to do together. . . . There’s just this idea of collaboration that we’re going to help each other along and we’re going to work together.”

“The department is remarkably congenial,” confirms Nuckolls. “When we meet together as a group, we are remarkably good at achieving consensus.” Undoubtedly this congeniality rests on a shared commitment to the importance of appreciating and studying language in all its forms.

The department also places a strong focus on the needs of students. The diverse skill sets that can be gained in the department, all of which rest on a firm basis of linguistic aptitudes, equip students for work and study in myriad areas. Students that graduate in linguistics go on to work as translators, teachers, lawyers, researchers, instructional designers, professors, publishers, editors, writers, and more. Rawlins says, “Students are leaving with professional qualifications but also with a firmer foundation in the understanding of and curiosity about language.”

President Spencer W. Kimball’s imperative issued in his 1975 “Second Century Address” that BYU become a “language capital of the world” serves as a unifying goal for the department. Former department chair Lynn Henrichsen says, “In the coming years, as we all work our hardest and do our best in our individual fields of academic endeavor, . . . as our graduates leave BYU and enjoy a wide range of successes based on the foundation we provided for them here, as our scholarly reputations increase, as visitors come to campus and see what great programs and facilities we have, as all these things happen, we will be making significant strides toward truly becoming an acknowledged language capital [in] the world.”

Dewey adds, “We’re teaching about language and learning and studying about language in a way that’s consistent with that prophetic direction to study the languages of the earth. And I think that makes us unique. It’s not simply a disciplinary interest that exists at the university; it’s a disciplinary interest that connects with the prophetic mission of the university and the Church.”