

By Meg Sullivan

In UCLA's top-ranked academic department, the exploration of linguistics creates new understanding of the intricacies of human speech.

“Wong tuwo,” said the Indonesian native in a long flowing tunic. “Wong tuwo.”
“Whaa-ung too-whoa,” repeated the UCLA graduate student in a t-shirt and cords. “Whaaa-ung too-whoa.”

In East Javanese, the words either means “old person,” “the person is old,” “wise person” or “parent.” It all depends on the context, subtle shifts in grammar, pronunciation and the presence or absence of an article that is sometimes tucked at the end.

Welcome to the experience that attracts many graduate students to UCLA's most highly-rated department: linguistics.

Opening a Broad World View



Linguistics department chair Tim Stowell: “If you're ever dropped in an Amazonian jungle, these are the methodological tools that you would use to start understanding a totally unfamiliar language and end up being an expert.”

For two quarters, students like Katie Schack—who has dreamed of conducting fieldwork since spending a summer in New Guinea—immerse themselves in the methods of linguistic field study.

The students regularly meet with the speaker of a language with which none of them—or, for that matter, few people anywhere else—have had prior contact. Through exchanges with R. Diah Larasati, a visiting scholar from Indonesia, this year's graduate students have slowly pieced together about 90 percent of Larasati's native East Javanese.

The graduate students have analyzed four aspects of linguistics: **phonetics** or how we produce and translate the sound waves that come out of our mouths and go into our ears as language; **semantics** or how meaning is encoded in language; **syntax** or grammatical representations of meaning; and **phonology** or the idiosyncratic rules governing the way sounds combine when they come into contact with each other in different languages.

And working with faculty Kie Zuraw and Hilda Koopman, they've painstakingly tracked their progress in phonetic transcription, a specialized alphabet with hundreds of letters that correspond with every possible language sound.

“If you're ever dropped in an Amazonian jungle, these are the methodological tools that you would use to start understanding a totally unfamiliar language and end up being an expert,” explained department chair Tim Stowell.

As grueling as the experience may sound, there was a time last year when it seemed like nailing linguistics field methods at UCLA was going to get even tougher.

In a turn of events unprecedented in the College's history, eight linguistics faculty were being recruited by different institutions in this country and abroad.

For a department with 21 faculty members, that meant more than one-third could have been pulled from one of the best linguistics departments in the nation, ranked with MIT, as a top program, according to the National Research Council.

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Gone would have been most of the personnel of the department's best known asset: the nation's first phonetics lab, made world famous by the late, great phonetician Peter Ladefoged, whose academic pedigree has been traced all the way back to Henry Sweet, the philologist said to have inspired George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion." (See www.linguistics.ucla.edu/people/ladefoged/remember/index.htm.)

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Gone also would have been the leaders of the department's hallmark collaboration between phonology and phonetics, a team that has demonstrated various subtle ways in which the physical limitations of the human voice production system have determined all kinds of otherwise inexplicable sound combinations in languages around the world.

Fortunately, the department wasn't at risk of losing the versatile Ed Keenan, the first American figure in semantics, an expert in the Micronesian language of Malagasy and a mathematical linguist. However the team that he has assembled stood to lose two of its most promising junior members.

Other institutions were "bending over backwards," Stowell said, to accommodate the scholars and their needs as researchers and teachers.

"Losing so many top faculty would have cut the heart out of one of our finest departments," said Patricia O'Brien, executive dean of the College of Letters and Science. "We did everything possible to retain these scholars."

"What appears to be encoded in our DNA is just astounding in its level of complexity and detail."

The university administration, ready to counter such recruitment bids, used a combination of funds from donors, the University of California system and the College.

Ultimately, UCLA prevailed; all of the faculty chose to stay at UCLA. The linguistics department now stands poised to be better than ever, said Stowell. But the situation illustrates the ongoing challenges

faced by the College in a period of mounting regard for UCLA's faculty, declining state support and increasing recruitment ambitions among private universities. (Seven of the eight linguistics faculty members were being wooed by private institutions.)

Stowell also faces a challenge of another kind: demonstrating the value of research that can seem to an outsider "like a pointless and trivial exercise."

"It's awfully difficult to convey why this work is interesting and important," Stowell said. Yet basic research into fundamental linguistic processes leads to broader understanding of the intricacy and universality of human language.

Consider just one of Stowell's areas of research: Headlines—the grammatical rules of headline writing and abbreviated English in many applications. In several scholarly presentations and a forthcoming book, Stowell contended that Headlines behaves like a mini-dialect, bound together by peculiar and predictable applications of verb tenses, articles and punctuation.

The discovery seems like just another fun fact, until Stowell starts to rattle off all the conventional languages that share some—if not all—of Headlines's quirks: Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Italian, Spanish and Catalan.

The implication is clear: although people struggle to master their native tongue and other languages, humans are all born with some basic capacity for language.

"What appears to be encoded in our DNA is just astounding in its level of complexity and detail," Stowell said.

But what is a given and what is learned still isn't certain. This, in no small measure, is the bailiwick of linguistics.

"The nature-or-nurture question pervades in a background kind of way almost all the work that goes on in linguistics," Stowell said.

Phonetics lab director Patricia Keating rubs her nose as she gives a tour of the facility that has been on the forefront of such quests. Her allergies are acting up because a torrent of dust has been unleashed by massive construction in 1950's era Campbell Hall.

Not that Keating is complaining. For years, she has had to send home research subjects during the summer months. It wasn't just that the research subjects were uncomfortable in the heat. The plastic collars that she uses to monitor their vocal chords couldn't function even though they are state-of-the-art.

"Subjects would start to sweat and the thing would slip around," Keating said. "It was hopeless—we just couldn't get a reading."

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Patricia Keating, professor of linguistics and director of the department's renowned phonetics lab.

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While upgrading the building for a seismic retrofit, the university is adding much needed air-conditioning.

In addition to such upgrades, a new lab will be added to the facility that is already outfitted with a sound proof-booth and all kinds of specialized equipment for recording and analyzing sound. UCLA's Infant Language Perception Lab is expected to be up and operating by next spring. To be managed by a new hire specializing in the ways infants come to recognize their native tongue, the lab is believed to be the first of its kind in an American linguistics department. Megha Sundara, who will come to linguistics as an assistant professor, will join two faculty members whose work has put UCLA on the forefront of child language

acquisition: Nina Hyams, a UCLA linguistics professor who looks at syntax acquisition among children; and Susan Curtiss, a neurolinguist who looks at what lessons breakdowns in language capabilities—dementia, deficits and impairments—have for the understanding of normal language acquisition.

And so it has gone throughout the history of the department, which July 1 marks its 40th anniversary. Outside of the occasional star hire like Keenan, who 32 years later remains the department's best known researcher, the department has come by its strength the old fashioned way. Beginning in 1966 with Ladefoged, who died this year, the young department at a young university hired promising young faculty. Older faculty, in turn, nurtured junior faculty.

It's hard to argue with success. The process built a department known for the study of African languages, the languages of Micronesia and endangered languages around the world. Especially due to the efforts of long-time professors Pam Munro and Russell Schuh, the department is responsible for countless grammars and dictionaries of rarely studied languages, including Wolof, Chickasaw, San Lucas Quiaviní Zapotec, Mojave, Cahuilla, Kawaiisu, Gabrielino/Tongva, Maricopa, Tübatulabal, Tolkapaya Yavapai, Ngizim, Avatime, Miya, Hausa and Karekare.


Still, the ability to make strong senior hires has its place as the department continues to grow and evolve. To that end, the department this spring made offers to recruit two stars from other universities.

"It feels so good to go from the position of trying to keep people here to trying to add to our bottom line," Stowell said. "My entire career has been here, and I want UCLA to do well."

Meanwhile, back in the semantics lab, Katie Schack and fellow graduate student Tomoko Ishizuka have more modest ambitions. They just want to understand compound words in East Javanese. The problem is that, unlike English, the language has no "be" verbs.

Hence the difficulty in pinning down precisely when "wong tuwo" means "old person" and when it means "the person is old."

Taken at face value, almost any exercise in linguistic could seem patently esoteric. What can it possibly matter how a compound word is formed in one of the 5,000 different languages spoken on an archipelago of some 17,000 islands?

Pursued just three or four steps further, the question lays bare a whole new view of the world. 

www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/linguistics