

Department of Linguistics and Philosophy

The Department of Linguistics and Philosophy is divided into two sections consisting of 28 faculty members (one of whom is jointly appointed and two of whom are on reduced effort as they approach retirement), 72 graduate students, two dozen or so visiting scientists and scholars, an administrative officer, an academic administrator, a systems administrator, a lab manager, and five support staff members. Each section operates independently, yet between them there is a significant overlap of intellectual interests in education and research spanning the faculty, graduate students, and visitors.

Research: Linguistics

Research by MIT's linguists continues to develop and test accounts of the representational and computational properties of the languages of the world. The department's overarching research goal is to understand the human capacity for language. Important questions include: Which of language's properties are uniform across the human species? Which of its properties play out differently in the languages of the world, and how? What does the interplay of uniformity and diversity in language structure teach us about language acquisition and learning? How do these properties of language interact with other cognitive systems? Specific, testable proposals are explored, developed, and challenged by students, faculty, and visitors who are pursuing research on syntax, semantics, pragmatics, morphology, phonology, phonetics, and the interfaces among these systems.

The department also provides students and faculty with support for experimental research and computational modeling in language acquisition and phonetic, syntactic, and semantic processing. Research on semantic processing is a particularly notable new initiative of the section. Facilities within the department include the [Experimental Syntax & Semantics Lab](#) and the Phonetics Lab. Experimental and computational research is also conducted in collaboration with colleagues from Brain and Cognitive Sciences (BCS) and Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (EECS), especially the Speech Group and other colleagues focusing on language acquisition, variation, and change.

Fieldwork on less-studied and endangered languages is an increasingly important research emphasis for many students and visitors. A feature of this research is a simultaneous emphasis on documentation and specific scientific questions of linguistic interest. Recent dissertations reflecting these twin goals have reported findings on languages as diverse as Dinka (Nilotic, Sudan), Tlingit (Na-Dené, Alaska), Chol and Tseltal (Mayan, Chiapas), Quechua (Colombia), and Zulu (Bantu, South Africa). In addition, an [experimental master's of science degree program](#), begun in fall 2004, has already graduated several students from communities attempting to revive indigenous languages.

Research: Philosophy

Philosophy at MIT studies a diverse range of central topics, and is characterized by a rigorous analytic approach. Among the topics currently pursued are consciousness and the mind-body problem; language and communication; self-knowledge; ethics and practical rationality; the nature of race and gender; mathematical logic, including formal theories of truth; “possible worlds” semantics for modal and conditional logic; perceptual knowledge; the nature of time; and the role of mathematics in science.

PIKSI Diversity Workshop

In collaboration with the University of Massachusetts-Boston Philosophy Department, a group of philosophy graduate students has [organized our first summer institute](#) for members of underrepresented groups: Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute (PIKSI-Boston). Professor Sally Haslanger worked with the American Philosophical Association (APA) and the board of an existing PIKSI at Penn State to submit a proposal to the Mellon Foundation for funds to support efforts to promote diversity in philosophy. Philosophy is arguably the least racially diverse of all disciplines in the academy, including science and engineering. Mellon awarded the APA \$600K for a wide range of efforts, among them PIKSI-Boston. Dean Deborah K. Fitzgerald was a key support for PIKSI-Boston and the Mellon grant, offering \$15K of support from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences for three years; the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy has committed \$5K for three years, and staff support.

For the week of August 2–7, PIKSI brings 20 students to campus, along with five diverse faculty from the region and four TAs, to attend classes, panels on graduate school and professional life, and fun activities. Students are paired with mentors who provide guidance and help them with their writing and, eventually, graduate school applications. Some sessions will be videotaped so they can be made available to a wider public. We have invited philosophers and administrators from around Boston to a final party as outreach, hoping that over time PIKSI will become self-sustaining through the support from a consortium of schools in the area.

Publications

Faculty on both sides of the department participated in numerous colloquia and acted as keynote speakers at conferences and workshops throughout the United States and the world. A number of our faculty served as editors and/or members of editorial boards for numerous journals both in the United States and abroad. They also published a large number of journal articles, book chapters, and reviews. Publications in academic year 2015 included Professor Alex Byrne, *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy* (edited with G. Rosen, J. Cohen, and S. Shiffrin), W.W. Norton; Professor Stephen Yablo, *Aboutness*, Princeton; Professor Kieran Setiya’s book, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, released in paperback; Professor Suzanne Flynn, with H. Shane, E. Laubscher, R. Schlosser, J. Sorce, J. Abramson, H. Fadie, and K. Corley, *Enhancing Communications for Individuals with Autism: A Guide to the Visual Immersion System*, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Baltimore.

Honors and Awards

Professor Michel DeGraff received the Haitian Studies Association Award for Excellence and MIT's Martin Luther King, Jr. Award for Leadership. Professor David Pesetsky was appointed as a Mellon visiting collaborator, Syracuse University (a joint program with Cornell and University of Rochester). Professor Donca Steriade was elected a fellow of the Linguistic Society of America. Professor Sally Haslanger received the Martin Luther King, Jr. Leadership Award at MIT. Professor Haslanger's book *Resisting Reality* (Oxford) won the Joseph B. Gittler Award for scholarly work in the philosophy of one or more of the social sciences. She was also elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. A special issue of the journal *Inquiry* was devoted entirely to Professor Agustin Rayo's book *The Construction of Logical Space*. Professor Judith Thomson was awarded an honorary degree of doctor of letters, Cambridge University.

Leaves of Absence

In FY2015, Professor Norvin Richards was on sabbatical leave during the fall semester. Professor Shigeru Miyagawa was on sabbatical leave for the spring semester. Assistant Professor Jack Spencer was on a junior faculty research leave for the spring semester.

Personnel

Currently there are two underrepresented minority and five female faculty members in the department. Our efforts to recruit qualified women and minority candidates will continue. The philosophy section conducted a junior faculty search that did not produce a viable candidate. The section will be conducting another junior faculty search this fall.

This year, Professor Roger Schwarzschild joined the Linguistics section, and Professor Kieran Setiya joined the Philosophy section.

David Pesetsky

Ferrari P. Ward Professor of Linguistics

MacVicar Faculty Fellow

Head, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy