

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), 74 graduate students, two dozen visiting scientists and scholars, an administrative officer, an academic administrator, a systems administrator, a lab manager, and five support staff members. Although each section operates independently, there is 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 and semantic issues in language acquisition is a particularly notable new initiative of the section. Facilities within the department include the [Experimental Syntax & Semantics Lab](#) and the [MIT Language Acquisition Lab](#). Experimental and computational research is also conducted in collaboration with colleagues from the Departments of Brain and Cognitive Sciences and Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, especially with members of the Speech Group and other colleagues who focus 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.

Philosophy is an Inclusive Key Summer Institute

In the summer of 2015, a group of MIT philosophy graduate students, in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts-Boston Philosophy Department, [organized a summer institute](#) for members of underrepresented groups: Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute (PIKSI-Boston). Out of an applicant pool of 227, the program hosted 20 students on campus for a week (August 2–7). Professor Lisa Rivera (University of Massachusetts-Boston) served as the director, and graduate student Matthias Jenny (MIT) was the graduate coordinator. The program brought five diverse faculty and four teaching assistants from the Boston area together to teach classes and offer panel discussions on graduate school and professional life. Recreational activities that emphasized the richness of the Boston area took place in the evenings. Some of the sessions were recorded so that informational panel discussions could be made available to a wider public, and we created a [promotional video](#) drawing on student and faculty interviews. Students were also paired with mentors who provided guidance and helped them with their writing and, eventually, their graduate school applications. The student evaluations at the end of the workshop showed tremendous enthusiasm, describing the workshop as “transformative,” “amazing,” and “one of the best weeks I’ve ever had.” As one student remarked, “I no longer feel like grad school is some far-off possibility.” “Only after I got here,” another commented, “had I realized how much I love being around peers who are as passionate about philosophy as I am.” Presently, five of the PIKSI-Boston students from 2015 have applied and were accepted into graduate programs for September 2016, and we anticipate that more will apply to graduate programs this year. PIKSI-Boston will run again in July 2016, and efforts are under way to ensure its future beyond 2018 when current Mellon grant funding runs out.

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 US and abroad. They also published a large number of journal articles, book chapters, and reviews. Publications in academic year 2015 included books by Professor Norvin Richards, *Contiguity Theory*, MIT Press; Professor Agustin Rayo, *La construction del espacio de posibilidades*, National Autonomous University of Mexico Press; and Associate Professor Bradford Skow, *Objective Becoming*, Oxford University Press.

Honors and Awards

Professor Kai von Fintel was elected as a fellow of the Linguistics Society of America. Professor Sally Haslanger was appointed as the Spinoza Professor at the University of Amsterdam. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) and was selected to be the Class IV speaker at the AAAS induction. Professor Irene Heim was appointed as the Senior Fellow at the Zukunftskolleg, University of

Konstanz, Germany. Professor Michel DeGraff was awarded MIT's Martin Luther King Jr. Leadership Award. Professor Sabine Iatridou was also elected as a fellow of the Linguistics Society of America. In addition, Professor Iatridou was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Crete and received a grant from the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences to fund a sabbatical semester at the University of Amsterdam. Professor Vann McGee was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Professor Donca Steriade was named the Karl Brugmann Fellow at the University of Leipzig, Germany, Institute of Linguistics. Professor Stephen Yablo was invited to give the Whitehead lectures at Harvard University and was awarded the Dyason Fellowship, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Leaves of Absence

In AY2016, Professor Michael Kenstowicz was on sabbatical leave for the full academic year. Michel DeGraff and Bradford Skow were on a sabbatical leave for the fall semester. Assistant Professor Justin Khoo was on a Junior Faculty Research Leave for the spring semester.

Personnel

Currently there are two 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 resulted in the hiring of Assistant Professor Edward Green, whose appointment will begin on July 1, 2017. We also made an associate professor without tenure offer to Miriam Schoenfield and have begun preparing a case for school council.

David Pesetsky

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