

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because Language Is Essential to Human Interaction

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Every day, we use language to communicate, argue, learn, negotiate, document, legislate, and celebrate. In the industrialized world, we are bombarded daily by language from radios, televisions, websites, signs, and talking devices, while in less technological societies, knowledge is transmitted orally. A better understanding of languages (individually), of language (as a collective human ability), and of their speakers helps us to better understand how society functions and how to improve it, and this is the domain of study of linguistics.

The foundations of linguistics begin with descriptions of the sounds and structures of many languages, from languages of global exchange spoken by millions, to local dialects spoken in remote corners of the world. The grammars constructed by theoretical linguists help us to see the similarities and relationships between languages, and to trace their histories. The more languages we can study, the better picture we have of the depth and breadth of the human language faculty.

Linguistics Is Interdisciplinary

Linguistics is far from a purely documentary or theoretical field. Many linguists are interdisciplinary, using (or contributing to) methods from many other scientific disciplines, including psychological, biological, and computational techniques.

These techniques allow linguists to probe linguistic behaviors in a wider range of settings, and to apply findings in many areas. My sub-field (psycholinguistics) uses the knowledge generated by descriptive linguistics about languages' structure as a starting point to study how they are used and learned by speakers. At Penn State, the Center for Language Science unites scholars from Linguistics, Psychology, Communication, and Languages who share a focus on multilingualism, which in our increasingly global society, is a research imperative.

Language acquisition research has direct applications in education, whether in helping children develop literacy skills or developing better techniques to help students learn new languages. Clinical fields such

as speech pathology, audiology, and medicine benefit from applied linguistic research on the nature of language-related disorders.

Linguistics also benefits from and contributes to the development of technology. Ever-increasing computing power is allowing the creation of larger and more powerful corpora of linguistic data, allowing us to discover new patterns. Advances in speech sciences have contributed to the development of devices which can respond to our commands and speak back to us, which is fun and convenient, but also increases the accessibility of technology to more people. Linguists are also leveraging new technology to study languages on new platforms (e.g., social media), documenting emerging subcultures and the linguistic innovations driven by the internet.

Language Is Culture

Not only does language bridge several scientific disciplines—natural and social—but linguistics also has roots in the humanities, and the connection between language and culture is undeniable. Modern scientific linguistics contributes to this tradition by employing its tools and techniques to describe and document linguistic diversity. This diversity includes not only the standardized norms of languages, but the many dialects and variations that are spoken in different regions and subcultures, signed languages, and the languages of peoples whose languages and cultures are in danger of extinction.

Why social science? Because continued support for research in all areas of linguistics, basic and applied, will have benefits for every field of inquiry which includes human behavior, for technological and economic development in a global society, and for the health of cultures and institutions.



Evan Bradley is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Penn State Brandywine. He earned his PhD in Linguistics from the University of Delaware and BA in Cognitive Science from Northwestern University. Dr. Bradley's research investigates the relationship between language and music perception and learning, and the role of gender and social attitudes in language use. He teaches courses on cognitive psychology, cognitive science, linguistics, perception, psycholinguistics, and music cognition. He has been a member of the Linguistic Society of America since 2004 and has served on the LSA's committees on public policy, higher education, and student concerns. His other professional interests include research methods and ethics, philosophy of science, and science policy, and he has participated in social science advocacy on behalf of the LSA and COSSA.



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