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WINTER 2021

UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS

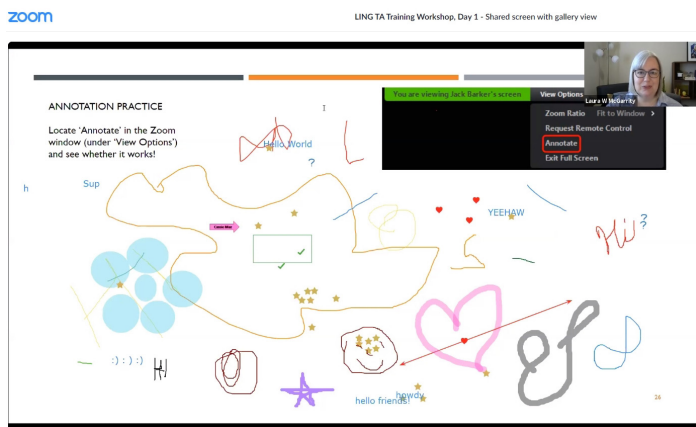
# NEWSLETTER



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# Teaching Linguistics in the COVID-19 era



The following is based on an interview with TA Coordinator and Associate Teaching Professor **Laura McGarrity**.

*How can we make online classes more interactive?*

A simple strategy is to occasionally stop screen sharing your slides so everyone in the class can see each other. It's easy to maintain an "instructional presence" with your students, whether online or in person, but it's much harder to cultivate a "social presence" online. It's important to consider both.

*Many linguistics classes have traditionally been geared towards training students in data analysis, using worksheets in class. How can we see if students are actually working on them if their video isn't turned on?*

(a) Well, we can't always, especially in breakout rooms. But borrowing a technique suggested by TA **Naomi Shapiro**, you can make some breakout rooms voluntary, which means interested students can then opt into them to work with other like-minded students. (b) Using shared Google docs for students to type their answers into allows you to see work being done in real time.

*What types of assessment works best for an online class?*

Online classes sometimes force us to think of new forms of assessment. Try: (a) credit/no-credit participation 'quizzes' after lecture videos to encourage students to self-check retention; (b) discussion threads where students respond to a posted prompt or to other students' responses.

*What are your thoughts on synchronous vs. asynchronous teaching?*

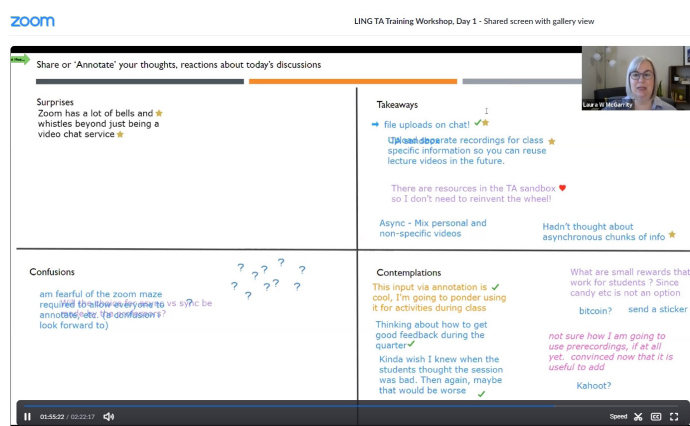
The two are often pitted against each other, as if we should choose one or the other. There are pros and cons to each and it's possible to incorporate the best of both. Try coupling pre-recorded lecture videos which students can watch on their own time with a weekly synchronous component to allow students to ask questions in real time.

*What has been your approach to training TAs to cope with this year's teaching environment?*

In this fall's (online) TA Training Workshop, Lead TA **Jiahui Huang** and I called upon our returning TAs (many who taught online in Spring) to share their experiences with the new TAs. Much of the above came from those discussions. We also try to maintain our 'social presence' with the TAs by sending out regular newsletters containing teaching tips that we find useful.

*What aspects of teaching might be permanently changed as a result of this forced online experience?*

It will certainly make us rethink some basic assumptions about teaching. Many of us would say we prefer in-person classes, but there are useful things to come out of online teaching as well. Online office hours are much easier than in-person office visits for working students and those who commute. Content videos recorded in a non-course-specific format may be reused in other courses, freeing up prep time. There's no doubt students can struggle with online classes, but there's some good to come out of it as well. It's up to us to find it.



# Faculty News

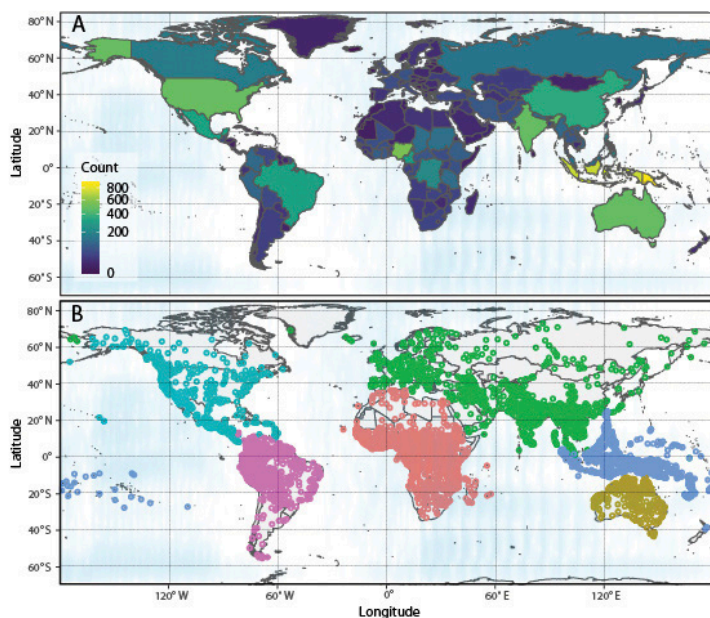
## Automatic Speech Recognition

**Alicia Beckford Wassink's** PNW English study [<https://artsci.washington.edu/news/2020-08/do-you-speak-northwest>] has since 2009 amassed a parallel corpus containing more than 5GB of spoken data from a multi-ethnic speaker sample including Washingtonians of Yakama, African American, European American, Japanese American and Chicanx background. The corpus is suitable for assessing ASR system performance because the same utterance is produced by speakers with different sociolects in different speech tasks. Automatic transcription was achieved using



CLOx [<https://clox.ling.washington.edu/>], a custom ASR service built on the Microsoft Speech Software Development Kit, created in the UW Sociolinguistics Laboratory. Wassink and her team of Linguistics grads and undergrads found differential performance for the different ethnicity-related accents. The phonetic error rate for the Caucasian American materials was 1.6 errors/100 words, 3.6 for the African American materials, 6.3 for the Yakama, and 6.6 for the Chicanx materials. These findings were reported at the February 2020 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in a panel with UW faculty Emily Bender and Gina Levow and alumna Rachael Tatman.

## Phonetic diversity



Have you always wanted to know more about the sounds of Nungon, Northern Horpa or Kalasha? Now you can, thanks to Ben Tucker (University of Alberta Linguistics) and **Richard Wright** (UW Linguistics), who recently edited a Special Issue on Phonetics of Under-Documented Languages for Journal of the Acoustical Society of America (2020, v. 147, issue 4) on the phonetics of underdocumented languages, which disseminates information about the sounds of Nungon, Chichemec, Kalasha and 22 other less studied languages in linguistics representing 13 language families from five continents. As Tucker and Wright note in their introduction to the volume (<https://doi.org/10.1121/10.0001107>), “less well-documented languages, such as Georgian, Cantonese, and Kannada, make up only 4% of the papers [in JASA between 2017 and 2019]. It is worth noting that many languages lacking acoustic description are spoken by millions of people.” In a companion article in Acoustics Today [<https://doi.org/10.1121/AT.2020.16.2.56>], Tucker and Wright point out that in order to understand what a possible human speech sound is, a large sample of languages is needed. Even a language with a large inventory of sounds will not come close to providing an adequate answer.

## Slavic linguistics annual conference



**Barbara Citko** organized the 29th Annual Meeting of the Formal Approaches to Slavic Linguistics, sponsored by the Department of Linguistics, jointly with the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures and Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, which met virtually on May 8-10, 2020 (FASL 29 website)[<https://sites.google.com/uw.edu/fasl29/>]. As Citko describes it, “the FASL conference, since its inception in 1992, has been one of the top conferences in the field of theoretical Slavic linguistics, attracting scholars from all over the world. Our initial plan was to host an in-person conference on campus; due to the COVID 19 pandemic, we pivoted to a virtual format. While the move to a virtual format presented some organizational challenges, it increased participation

quite a bit: over 160 people registered for the conference, which must be a record for FASL! The conference program[<https://sites.google.com/uw.edu/fasl29/program/>] consisted of 28 presentations and posters, which dealt with a wide range of topics within Slavic syntax, semantics, phonology, acquisition, historical and corpus linguistics. Additionally, the conference featured three keynote speakers: Peter Jurgec from the University of Toronto, whose talk looked at the learnability of Slovenian palatalizing suffixes; Asya Pereltsvaig from San Francisco State University, who spoke about relationship between anaphor binding and word order in Russian; and Ljiljana Progovac from Wayne State University, whose talk examined predication from an evolutionary perspective.”

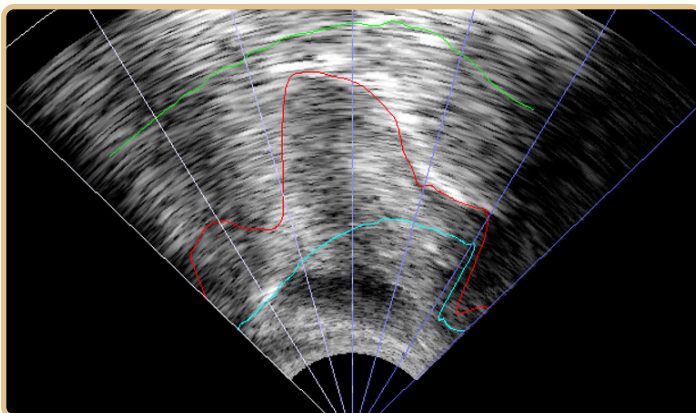
## Student news

Autumn 2020 congratulations go to:



**Leanne Rolston**, defended dissertation on ‘Dialogical Signals of Stance Taking in Spontaneous Conversation’ (**Gina Levow**, chair of supervisory committee)

**Ajda Gokcen**, passed General Exam (**Gina Levow**, chair of supervisory committee)



**Rob Squizzero**, passed General Exam (**Alicia Beckford Wassink**, chair of supervisory committee).

Squizzero was also awarded a National Science Foundation grant for *Ethnic Minorities’ Participation in a Pacific Northwest English Sound Change: An Articulatory and Acoustic Investigation*, a sociolinguistically-informed phonetic study of a loss of contrast between vowels before /l/ in the varieties of English spoken in Washington State. Ultrasound imaging is used to investigate the timing and magnitude of tongue gestures and their effects on the acoustics of speech. The study samples from African American, Mexican American, and Yakama (Native American) populations, ethnic groups that are minorities in Washington State and traditionally underrepresented in linguistic studies. This work is supervised by Alicia Beckford Wassink.

## Computational Linguistics news

The Computational Linguistics Master of Science program normally hosts a 2-day in-person orientation in late September for new students, who come from all over the country. In 2020 the orientation was successfully moved to a virtual format, with a mix of live sessions and pre-recorded talks, as well as social interactions via breakout rooms and an online town [<https://theonline.town/>] interface. While this experience could not fully replicate the usual picnic and other activities, a feedback survey showed that the new CLMSers really valued this experience, and especially the opportunities to get to know each other better!



Emily M. Bender organized an international (online) workshop (May 11-13): “Data Statements for NLP: Towards Best Practices” together with Prof. Batya Friedman of the iSchool and Linguistics PhD student Angelina McMillan-Major and sponsored by UW’s Tech Policy Lab. As Bender describes it, “this workshop was initially scheduled to be a one-day event associated with the Language Resources and Evaluation Conference (LREC 2020) in Marseille. In moving to an online format, it was spread out over three days in

order to catch enough hours with participants from all around the globe (including Argentina, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Nigeria, as well as the US and Europe). The workshop was organized as a working meeting where the organizers assisted participants in writing data statements---documentation of datasets which are fundamental to research and technology development in natural language processing (NLP)---for datasets that they are developing. The datasets at play included such varied languages and data types as German Sign Language, simplified writing in Basque, Mauritian riddles and proverbs, English Twitter data, and pairs of Fon-French translations (Fon being a language of Benin). Sample data statements developed during the workshop can now be found on the workshop webpage[<https://sites.google.com/uw.edu/data-statements-for-nlp/>]. At the same time, Bender, Friedman and McMillan-Major received input from these participants which they are using to develop best practices for creating data statements that are responsive to a broad variety of research contexts, both in terms of the institutional environment (which is quite different between say Sri Lanka and Germany) and in terms of the types of underlying data being described.”

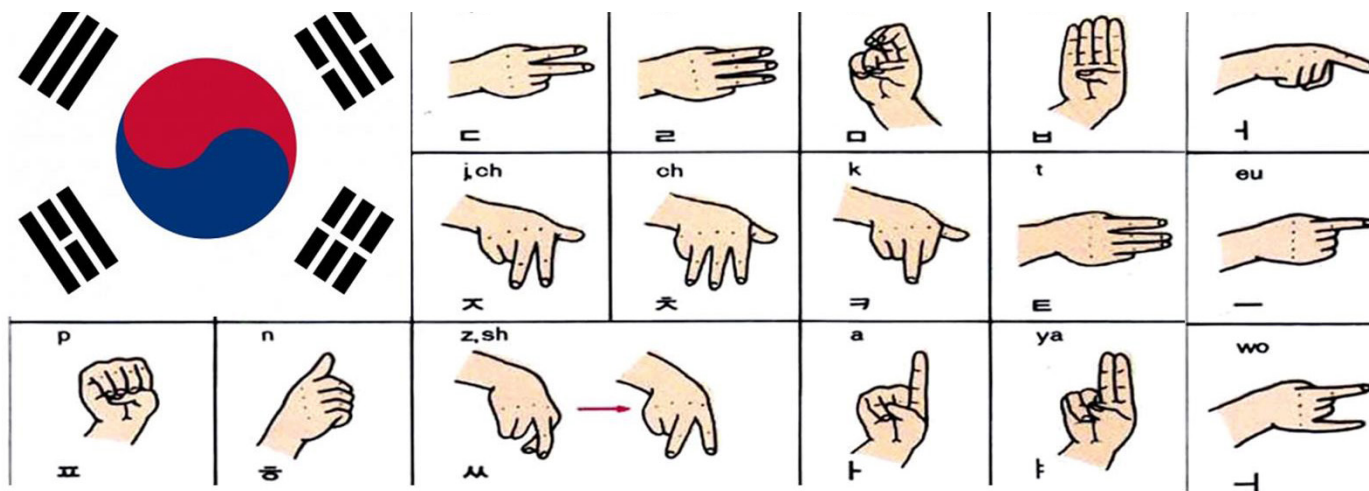
Polls

Poll 5: NLP apps: functionality

**1. Which of these NLP applications do you think works the best?**

- Spell checker
- Grammar checker
- Predictive text (auto-complete)
- Machine translation
- Voice assistant
- Web search

## American Sign Language News



Dr. Chang Hwang

On top of their duties teaching American Sign Language, the preferred language of Deaf people in the United States and Canada, the ASL faculty also draw attention to Deaf people and their languages in other countries. On December 10, 2020, the ASL program and Asian Languages and Literatures co-hosted a colloquium by Dr. Chang Hwang (formerly of Central Washington University) on 'History and Development of Korean Sign Language (KSL) in South Korea', signed in ASL. Associate Teaching Professor **Lance Forshay** introduced Dr. Hwang and moderated the question and answer period. Colloquium attendees learned that Like ASL in North America, KSL has had to struggle against oralism, suppression, and misunderstanding, but in 2015 the Fundamental Law of Korean Sign Language was passed in the South Korea National Assembly, making KSL an official language. Also, the sign languages of South Korea and North Korea have greatly diverged since the Korean War, and are now estimated to be 70% different from each other, far more different than the spoken languages of the two countries. The biggest historical influences on KSL have been from contact with Japanese Sign Language, ASL and Chinese Sign Language.

The ASL faculty have embarked on a project to develop a Video Resources Center for ASL program use and beyond. Working with **Russell Hugo** of the Language Learning Center (and a 2016 Linguistics PhD), they are seeking permission from publishers to preserve old VCR sign videos which were acquired from Seattle Central College's ASL and Interpreter Training Program, which closed down in 2017. Updates on this long-term project will be provided in future newsletters.



## Featured Alumnus: Steven Moran



Prof. Steven Moran

**Steven Moran's** evolution as an evolutionary linguist started with a two-month stint at the Max Planck Institute (MPI) for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig before finishing graduate school. At the MPI Moran made contacts with linguists who used quantitative methods to explore large scale language comparison and remote linguistic relationships. After filing his 2012 dissertation, *Phonetics Information Base and Lexicon*, a study of properties of the sound systems of 1089 distinct spoken languages, Moran's phylogenetic skills were honed by a series of postdoctoral research positions on quantitative approaches to language change and diversity at the Universities of Munich and Marburg (with Michael Cysouw [ˈsɪsəʊ]), and at the University of Zurich (with Balthasar Bickel). Another postdoc with Sabine Stoll on a cross-linguistic child language acquisition project at the University of Zurich developed his ontogenetic side. (Having no formal training in language acquisition, he describes himself as having been “thrown in the deep end” during this time.) Meanwhile, Moran was accruing publications on sound system diversity and complexity and remote language relationships, including a 2019 article (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.aav3218>) proposing how labio-dental fricatives in sound inventories could have arisen from the post-adolescent persistence of overbite and overjet with softer food diets in agricultural societies.

Now Moran has his own five-year research grant (<http://unine.ch/evolang/home/team/steven-moran.html>) through the Swiss National Science Foundation to investigate whether language could have evolved slowly. The Institute of Biology at the University of Neuchâtel provides the academic home for this project on the development of phonology in humans from a biological perspective. Moran and his team of three PhD students and collaborators at the University of Zurich are trying to determine what aspects of the phonetic space might be reconstructable to the split with the common ancestor between humans and other primates. Along the way the team plans to apply linguistic phonetic methods to the study of great ape vocalizations and to investigate the phonetic space of the larger oro-facial cavities of Neanderthals, and assess theories that spoken language came out of gestural communication.

Moran's advice to current PhD students in linguistics is “follow your passion, but be cognizant of your future opportunities”. In Moran's case, at his MA institution, Eastern Michigan University, he enjoyed his documentary fieldwork on Western Sisaala, but soon realized that it was very difficult to get a full time job as a field linguist, so he decided to study computational linguistics at the University of Washington to ensure he could get some kind of job at the end of his studies. Fortunately for Moran and the field of linguistics, he is still pursuing one of his passions.



## Featured Language: Tigrinya



Tigrinya, a Semitic language of Eritrea, has thousands of speakers in the Puget Sound area. Tigrinya native speaker **Seium Habties** once again guided UW linguists in Winter 2020 Field Methods in an exploration of the structure of his language. Prof. **Sharon Hargus** designed assignments for students **Ella Deaton**, **Rob Squizzero**, and **Tsdoi Wada** on the sound system, nouns and verbs, and other areas of Tigrinya grammar, as well as explorations of the Tigrinya lexicon and texts.

Habties had a connection to UW even before his first quarter working with UW linguists in an Autumn 2018 field methods class [<https://linguistics.washington.edu/news/2019/01/22/professor-sharon-hargus-teaches-tigrinya-field-methods-course>]. His wife, **Neghisty Habties**, was a member of the custodial staff at UW for many years before retiring in 2020. In 2018 Hargus approached Custodial Services looking for a Tigrinya speaker to work with the class, and she was put in touch with Neghisty, who suggested her husband.

UW Linguistics affiliate faculty **David Odden** (formerly of Ohio State University) also participated in the Winter 2020 class, providing the class with much appreciated technical expertise and guidance from his decades of field study of various African languages, including Kimatuumbi, Logoori and Kerewe. Odden and Habties have continued to meet and research the Tigrinya sound system and word structure, including investigations into pharyngeals, geminate consonants, and other phenomena, and are working on developing a web page making information about Tigrinya generally available.

## Support us

### Support our program:

- Strengthen our department through the Friends of Linguistics Fund which is perhaps the single most important resource for the department. Gifts to this fund provide unrestricted support that can be directed where it is needed most.

**Any gift — large or small — is sincerely appreciated!**

## Want more UW Linguistics? Questions?

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Newsletter feedback or suggestions should be sent to **Sharon Hargus** ([sharon@uw.edu](mailto:sharon@uw.edu)).