

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Over the winter break our faculty visited several continents: Karen Zagona and Heles Contreras saw penguins in Antarctica; Ellen Kaisse hiked the Lake District in Southern Chile; Scott Farrar collected data in the Amazon; Barbara Citko celebrated Christmas in Mexico; Richard Wright spent a month in Taiwan; Fei Xia went to a computational conference in India; Alicia Wassink returned from England where she was doing sabbatical collaboration in Newcastle; Jurgen Klausenburger cut short his stay in France because of a broken arm (healing nicely now); I ziplined and hiked in Hawaii; Emily Bender and Betsy Evans (new sociolinguist) traveled to the Midwest, while Toshi Ogihara held the fort in Seattle. Edith Aldridge (new syntactician) is soon leaving for a conference in China.

We are enjoying collaboration with four new faculty members, Assistant Professors Edith and Betsy and Full Time Lecturers Lance Forshay (who has initiated our ASL program) and Laura McGarrity (who excels in her teaching of

Ling 200 and phonology). Five scholars—Sharon, Alicia, Emily, Fei and Scott—have NSF funding. Toshi's latest book is in press with Cambridge UP (which just published mine). Fei and Barbara received the highly competitive Royalty Research Fund awards (30% acceptance rate). Finally, everyone has given conference papers and invited lectures in this country and elsewhere.

On the instructional front, we are excited about expanded offerings in sociolinguistics, syntax and the new program in ASL, whose 101 classes had a waiting list of 300 in the autumn. Our CLMA program continues to develop innovative approaches to delivering learning opportunities and will offer a Computational Linguistics Certificate beginning next summer. Emily's offering of online access to one of her courses in autumn 2007 has served as a prototype for future delivery. Sharon, Ellen and Lead TA David Goss-Grubbs are reassessing the undergraduate major thanks to a grant from the College for cur-

riculum evaluation. Finally, we are sponsoring (with the Simpson Center for the Humanities and the College of Arts & Sciences) a lecture series on early bilingualism that complements our regular course offerings. Check it out at http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/projects_bilingualism0708.htm.

Donors to Linguistics continue to support our Nostrand Professorship, our programs (including out of town lecturers like Derek Bickerton who will speak on March 19), our graduate students and our graduate fellowship. All the members of the Department are very grateful for your continuing generosity.

Julia Herschensohn

**Editor's note**

In this issue we depart from tradition by experimenting with occasional single-theme issues and with flexibility in number of pages.

We value readers' feedback on these and other matters. Please let us know what you think. (See back page for contact information.)

Jim Armagost

Nostrand Endowed Professorship

The Department deeply appreciates the continuing generosity of Frances Nostrand, who recently contributed an additional \$45,000 to the endowed Professorship encouraging research in language and cultural competence. Alicia Wassink currently holds the Nostrand Professorship.

FOUR CURRENT NSF GRANTS ILLUSTRATE T

For several years Professor Sharon Hargus has been documenting four threatened Native American/First Nations languages in Washington, Alaska and British Columbia.

Her latest NSF grant is funding a component added to her research on three languages in Alaska and British Columbia, Tsek'ene, Deg Xinag and Witsuwit'en, which are



all members of the Athabaskan language family.

As part of the International Polar Year, the large scientific program focused on the Arctic and the Antarctic from March 2007 to March 2009, Sharon's current grant provides a rare opportunity to collect first-hand accounts of local climate change over the past 80 years and make them available to a wide audience.

Between July 2007 and late November 2007 she completed her first year of fieldwork on these languages, which focused on collecting, transcribing and translating texts.

Another focus of her current grant is comparative Athabaskan grammar. She has just presented a poster at the January 2008 meeting of the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas on Deg Xinag lateral affricates, which

also included some comparison with Witsuwit'en.

Other comparative topics of research will include intonation, agreement patterns involving the "areal" morpheme and copulas. Eventually, this kind of research may provide a window into when (and possibly where) their ancestors may have diverged from a common source language. Research Assistant Meghan Oxley has been a big help to Sharon in this first year.

Finally, some time in each community is devoted to ongoing literacy training so that local speakers and/or learners may be able to help with some aspect of text transcription or translation. Thus one side result of the project may be greater mobilization of local resources for language documentation.

And a very healthy result that would be indeed.

While other varieties of American English have attracted repeated scholarly attention, little linguistic research on western varieties has occurred. Associate Professor Alicia Wassink's current NSF grant allows her and Portland State University colleague Jeffrey Conn to collaborate in a study of the features of Pacific Northwest English that will make contributions in three areas.



First, while detailed work has shown that the pronunciation of vowels, not consonants, most distinguishes the seven major dialects of American English, no in-depth study of Pacific Northwest vowels exists. Wassink and Conn will soon provide a description in the tradition of urban dialectology within a sociolinguistic framework.

Second, several scholars have suggested that notable divergences, if not actual distinguishing features, exist between English west and east of the Mississippi, but little has been done to investigate the matter. Wassink and Conn's project moves forward by examining what has happened linguistically in two hundred years of cultural contact here in the Northwest. For example, it may turn out that older speakers, the first family members to have moved west, retain all or most features of their dialects of origin,

while their children or grandchildren exhibit a mixture of features, some from their parents' speech and others characteristic of the Northwest communities in which they grow up. Wassink and Conn want to know which features of pronunciation become predominant for the region as a whole, and why.

Third, as sociolinguists refine methods for studying dialect contact, they will require richer databases of recorded speech, having demographic depth and breadth and including speakers from various ethnic backgrounds. Wassink and Conn's database, a multi-media archive of this sort, will be a valuable resource for current and future scholars.

The project website is at <http://www.artsci.washington.edu/nwenglish/index.asp>.

THE DEPARTMENT'S STRENGTH IN RESEARCH

A CAREER award, NSF's most prestigious funding, together with other funding sources is allowing Assistant Professor Emily Bender to advance her work in computer modeling of language structure.

A natural language is so complex that it is advantageous to write its grammar as software that manages the complex interactions of various subparts and allows automated



testing against large text databases. Two considerations lead to an interesting innovation, however. One is the not insignificant cost and difficulty of developing individual software from scratch for a large number of the world's nearly 7,000 languages, most of which have not been studied deeply. The other consideration is that all languages seem to be greatly similar. This suggests that existing work on computerized models for a few well-studied languages can be leveraged to jumpstart the cost-effective creation of models for other languages.

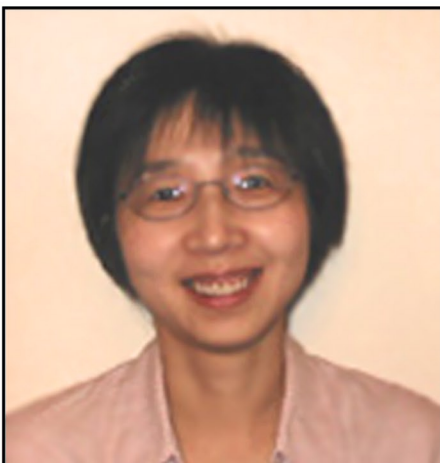
With that goal in mind Bender is in the early stages of preparing a grammar customization system. It combines a standardized core grammar, or abstract template containing what is believed to be common to all languages, with a series of 'libraries' specifying alternate ways of realizing different linguistic subsystems that vary across lan-

guages, such as the expression of tense and aspect, coordination and negation. The process of building the system itself involves an unprecedented exploration of computational linguistic typology, examining precise analyses of diverse linguistic phenomena across a sample of languages that are believed to exhibit the boundaries of variation.

The developed system will allow linguists to easily customize a small working grammar for a particular language, which they can then use as a test-bed for further linguistic investigation. The broader impacts of Bender's project include the potential for quicker, more precise documentation of endangered languages and cheaper development of natural language technology for under-resourced languages such as machine translation, grammar checkers and computer-assisted language learning programs.

Assistant Professor Fei Xia is collaborating with colleagues at four other universities in NSF funded research on a topic of continuing interest—creating treebanks. A treebank is a collection of naturally occurring text annotated with various types of structural information.

The team is investigating the feasibility of creating a treebank with



multiple representations including both dependency structure and phrase structure (two types of syntactic representation). Of interest are the extent to which the conversion between dependency and phrase structure can be automated, the extent to which hand correction will be necessary after automatic conversion and the extent to which the team can leverage experience from the creation of other treebanks.

An example of the latter is the Chinese Penn Treebank, of which Xia was a co-designer. It consists of about one million words that are segmented, tagged for part of speech and fully bracketed. The data sources include newswire from the Xinhua News Agency, articles from Sinorama Magazine, news from the website of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and transcripts from various broadcast

news programs.

Building on previous results, the team is experimenting in an attempt to demonstrate the feasibility of generating phrase structure from dependency structure. Up to now such work is limited to English, the only language for which well-defined guidelines for both phrase structure and dependency structure exist. Other languages with tested guidelines for one of the two formalisms include Chinese, Korean and Arabic (phrase structure) and Czech, German, Dutch and Russian (dependency structure). The team is extending their conversion experiments to one of these languages as well, creating the necessary additional guidelines in the process. Finally, looking ahead, the team is running more experiments on other languages as they anticipate receiving another NSF grant soon to create a treebank for Hindi/Urdu.

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