

Linguistics Demoz Prize Winner 2024

Adam Leif:

- **How did you first become interested in linguistics?**

*While I was always interested in language, I didn't know that linguistics as a field existed until my sophomore year of high school. For my English class, we had to either pick a book to read from the AP list or get something vetted by the teacher: my mom suggested that I read **The Sparrow** by Mary Doria Russell, whose main character is a field linguist (he goes to space and stuff, but we can ignore that part). I was really interested in the scientific and methodical approach to language that the book showed me, and already being computer science minded, thought that getting into AI/NLP could be a cool idea for college. Of course, I haven't exactly done much in the NLP space at this point and am primarily focused on syntax... but still, that's how it started!*

- **How have you been involved in the Linguistics Department outside of your coursework?**

At the end of last year, I became one of the NULSA co-presidents alongside Joy Fu. Otherwise, I was a summer undergraduate research assistant for Prof. Voigt three times, did an independent study with Prof. Yoshida (also at the end of last year), participated in both of their labs, and just recently completed my honors thesis on N-movement in English.

- **Can you briefly describe any research projects in linguistics that you've been involved with?**

My first project with Prof. Voigt was to create some webscraping and API interfacing tools that would help to establish his (then-new) lab, alongside Jacob Katz, another undergrad. Then, my sophomore year, I continued to do some webscraping work, creating a Craigslist housing post scraper (based on some work done the previous year by a couple of grad students). After that, I continued to monitor the constantly running Craigslist scraper while also working with Jason Jewell to gather ACL paper text and metadata. In my independent study with Prof. Yoshida, I helped validate verb transitivity in some experimental items and created experimental items for an ongoing experiment, doing some related readings simultaneously. Finally, this year, I created items for a rating experiment that served as the basis of my honors thesis, manipulating two factors in an attempt to find further evidence for N-movement (noun head movement) in English, which is a covert process (in English, as opposed to overt in Spanish) that's difficult to observe; I just recently have had the opportunity to present a poster on that work and do an oral presentation at the end of May.

- **How do you see your linguistics major fitting into your career plans after graduation?**

After an arduous application process, I'm excited to say that I'll be pursuing a PhD at UCLA over the coming years. I plan to focus primarily in syntax and secondarily on computational linguistics, at least as things currently stand.

I'm hoping to continue a career in academia afterwards, if possible, and become a professor -- though don't hold me to that! Who knows if I'll decide to pivot to industry in the future. At the moment, I'm really enjoying doing research and I love sharing my passion for linguistics with others, and I hope that will continue far into my future. and career.

- ***What advice would you have for students considering a linguistics major?***

I would absolutely encourage anyone who's interested in language or linguistics specifically to consider picking up a linguistics major. All of the faculty, grad students, and my peers have been incredibly warm, helpful, and informative over the last few years. The skills that you pick up from seriously engaging with linguistics can certainly help you in other academic and career-oriented areas -- but, beyond that, linguistics has just been plain fun to engage with. Even if you aren't totally sure about it, I'd encourage anyone and everyone to at least try out a class or two: maybe you'll get hooked like I did. Finally, from a practical standpoint, it's not an overwhelming major course-wise, and you can totally fit it in alongside really heavy majors, like I did with my computer science major.

Thank you for your continuing support to the Linguistics Department!

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