

Linguistics Scholar Speaks at MIT



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“Oh, so you study languages?” is a question that CHC junior Jack Duff frequently receives upon telling people that one of his majors is linguistics.

The answer is, not really.

Linguistics is not the study of the languages that we as people use to communicate with one another; rather, it is the study of the human brain’s capability for language. Areas of study include phonetics (speech sounds), syntax (the arrangement of words and phrases in sentences), semantics (meaning), and much more.

Jack Duff in particular has been assisting Professor Lyn Frazier of the UMass Linguistics Department and Professor Emeritus Chuck Clifton of the Psychological and Brain Sciences Department in their study on negation raising.

The study consisted of three experiments, all of which were conducted online. One hundred people across the US were given sentences in Standard English (versus, for example, African American Vernacular English) and rated them on a scale depending on how natural the sentences sounded. Jack joined the study this year thanks to a previous lab assistant graduating last year, expecting only to help the professors further develop their research.

On April 1st though, Jack presented the study’s poster at the 20th CUNY Conference on Human Sentence Processing, hosted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The conference’s purpose is to share information on the brain and how humans process languages with it. It is *incredibly* rare for undergraduate students to present at conferences such as this one.

Going into college, Jack had always been interested in linguistics. The subject combined both his love for working with words (books in particular), which he has had since he was a young child, and his enthusiasm for designing and conducting experiments.

And by being in the Commonwealth Honors College as well as the Linguistics Department, Jack has been encouraged to explore his other interests at UMass Amherst. The small sizes of the honors courses, such as the Modern Arabic Literature one he took last year, allowed him to learn more about these interests in depth.

The conference has passed, but Jack would still like to thank Professor Lyn Frazier and Professor Emeritus Chuck Clifton, who have given him both the opportunity to assist them in the lab and present their findings at MIT.

He would also like to thank Professor John Kingston, also of the Linguistics Department and the first professor whose lab he worked for, as well as graduate student Amanda Rysling. All of Jack's mentors in the Linguistics and Classics Departments though (the latter of which Jack is double majoring in) have been instrumental in molding his education today.

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