

## Stephanie Shih – 2007 Graduation Speech

So, when I was young, I never thought that I'd be a linguistics graduate. I'm sure that the same goes for all of you here today—except maybe you, Professor Garrett.

Well, out of everyone, I'd especially never, ever thought that I'd be a linguist. From elementary through high school, I was the prescriptivist's prescriptivist—I loved grammar usage, and I shuddered—and still shudder—at the sound of an “If I was” subjunctive. Ugh. <beat> Once, before sophomore year of college, I had told a family friend that I was an English major interested in grammar usage but didn't know what to do with my life. She said to me, “What about linguistics,” and my first, instinctive reaction was:

OMG, NO FREAKING WAY! EW! I have absolutely no interest in being a polyglot and learning a thousand languages!

Oh, how I would swallow those words when I declared a linguistics major no more than seven months later. <beat> But really, I think that I had that reaction because I, like many other people, just didn't know what linguistics is. Linguistics does *not* mean learning a thousand languages or being a grammar Nazi, I found out later. Not in the slightest. So, as many graduation speakers have done before me, I wanted to give you all here today a short summary of what linguistics is.

My very first textbook for the “Introduction to Linguistics” class defines linguistics as “the discipline that studies language.” <beat> I guess that's why it's an introduction to linguistics book. <beat> Well, Mark Liberman, in his plenary address at the national Linguistic Society of America conference this past January, put it much better: “Linguistics is ambiguous,” he said. “At once, it's the discipline of the study of language, and also, linguistics is what linguists do.”

I like his definition because it's true, linguistics IS the discipline that studies language, but I think that what's most important is that linguistics is defined by what linguists do. So here's my definition of linguistics:

Linguistics can be anything we linguists make it out to be. Linguistics is phonology to phonologists. Linguistics is syntax to syntacticians. Linguistics is phonetics, it's morphology. There are graduates sitting here today who will tell you that, to them, linguistics is fictive interaction, linguistics is phonological attrition in Taiwanese Mandarin, linguistics is lexical recognition, linguistics is the modern college students' perspective on the courtesy title, “Ms.” For several of us, linguistics is pouring over Picuris data with our groups, passing around a fox tail, and saying “Kaxweki” at the end of every story. Linguistics is taking our core classes: Ling 100 – “Intro to linguistic science,” 110 – “Phonetics and Phonology,” 115 – “Phonology and Morphology,” 120 – “Syntax and Semantics,” and 130 – “Historical Linguistics.” Linguistics is memorizing formant ranges for vowels, it's being able to read spectrograms—yeah, parents, did you know that your kids can actually read one of those sound graphs with crazy lines? Linguistics is saying Cardinal Vowel ONE instead of “Cheese” when taking pictures, which is something that I hope you all remember to do today—[iiiiiiiiii]! Linguistics is making methatasis jokes and finding them the most hilarious thing in the world. Linguistics is knowing that

“excrecence” is not something one does in the bathroom but rather something that one does in sound change when epenthesizing a medial consonant. Linguistics is being really familiar with John and Mary and knowing exactly when Mary kicked John or when John kicked himself. But sometimes linguistics is hitting your head against a dead horse because you just can’t figure out exactly how to spread that damned nasality in autosegmental notation. Linguistics is working with sounds, patterns, words, and sentences.

For all of you parents who might think that linguistics has no practical application—think again. All of our problem sets are based on real-life data from languages all over the world. <beat> Try to get that kind of variety in engineering. <beat> In real life, linguistics is saving languages like a superhero, except that we don’t have any awesome spandex suits (with big schwas on the chest). Linguistics is reconstructing and analyzing languages just like how those guys on CSI every week reconstruct a crime scene—we look everywhere for every clue available, even if that means digging in a dusty library, driving hundreds of miles to work with speakers, putting together a corpus from the small snippets of data that you get in various different articles, or scrutinizing one short sound file for hours on end. Sure, linguistics may be theoretical, but it is not laconically so: theoretical linguistics—of the good kind—is ALWAYS backed by empirical evidence, a lot of which linguists themselves collect. And then, linguistics is taking this knowledge and giving it back to the people who need it—Professor Garrett actually received one of the top teaching awards at UC Berkeley this year for doing just that.

Many of you parents might also think that becoming a linguistics professor has no practical application. But, linguistics is made up of those linguists and professors. Linguistics is defined when a professor cares so much that she will finish seven graduate school letters of recommendation for a student only weeks before she has a baby, as Professor Nichols did for me this past year. Or when a professor will take the time to impart the elusive knowledge of automatic example numbering in Microsoft Word, as Professor Inkelas did. Or when a professor takes unpaid hours every week over the course of an entire year, including summertime, to meet with her student and exhaustively discuss every detail of a text-setting thesis, as my other co-advisor, Professor Hanson, did. Linguistics is when the professors are so passionate and set such examples that they inspire nearly every single linguistics student to be passionate about linguistics as well. <beat> I mean, parents—tell me that becoming a teacher like that who affects and inspires every one of her students so much is not practical.

Linguistics is loving bad puns: Star-Struc feet, don’t let metrical stress you out, one of my favorites: phonology equals FUN-ology, you mora less get it, as Professor Inkelas would say. Linguistics is totally geeking out about getting the Spring 1977 edition of *Linguistic Inquiry* for fifty cents at a linguistics department book sale. Linguistics is making lasting friendships with your study group because you’re in such a small department—it’s when homework is synonymous with “hang-out” time. It is augmenting your vocabulary with the following words: confer, predictive value, underlying, follows from, motivate, a priori, surface, ad hoc, and, most notably, robust. Linguistics is finding it *SO* cool that Michael-freaking-Kenstowicz signed my Kenstowicz *Phonology in Generative Grammar* textbook. <beat> Linguistics is, as Kashmiri Stec so eloquently put it, “super-awesome and wonderful.”

Only, what's way more super-awesome and wonderful is that all of you are part of Berkeley Linguistics. I honestly don't think that there would have been a better place at all for me to learn about linguistics and to really learn what linguistics is. Any other place would not have taught me all of these things that make up linguistics—from the phonetics (which isn't required at many other schools) to the puns to the people.

As the last thing I will say in this speech, I wanted to leave everyone here with two small lessons that I've gleaned from linguistics during my time at CAL. When I was looking up what to put in a graduation speech on the internet, one piece of advice was very robust: nearly everyone said to include at least two inspirational quotes that people can take away with them. So, as not to break with tradition, here are my two:

First: and, this is a piece of advice taken from some of the Pueblo Native Americans in the Southwest: always put your goat on the roof. <beat> As Professor Nichols told us, "You laugh, but if you lost your goat, you'd be sad."

My second piece of advice and my final thing to say is something that I heard in my very, very first linguistics class, English 179: "Literature and Linguistics." In one of our earliest lectures, Professor Hanson told the class something that had been passed down from Otto Jespersen to Paul Kiparsky to her to the class and now I'm passing on to you. This Jespersen saying is probably supposed to be applied to linguistics, but I've found that it's applicable to not only linguistics but also, well, <beat> life. Okay, it goes: "Life consists of the little things; the important matter <beat> (and what I've tried to do today) <beat> is to see them largely."