

Linguistics 499: Senior Thesis Research

1. What is LIN 499?

LIN 499 is a one-semester, 2-credit capstone course. It is a required course for Linguistics majors. A capstone is “a method of summative evaluation in which the student is given an opportunity to demonstrate integrated knowledge and growth in the major.”¹ The experience is intended to provide you with the opportunity to reflect on what you’ve learned in the undergraduate program, to discover relationships in what may have appeared as disparate experiences, and to reassess personal views, judgments, and beliefs about human language. The experience may also serve as a bridge to subsequent enrollment in a graduate program of study, or to professional development of some other kind.

For this reason, majors typically (but not always) enroll in LIN 499 in their senior year, once they have accumulated a breadth of experience in linguistics. Student success in LIN 499 is evaluated via an extended piece of original writing: the senior thesis.

2. What is a senior thesis in linguistics like?

A thesis in linguistics represents your original research or thinking. Occasionally the thesis will be no more than a critical review of the literature, but it is usually expected that students will produce something novel. The format and length of the thesis will be somewhat dependent on your area of research (see point 5), and is to be mutually agreed upon with your thesis advisor (see point 4). However, 25-35 pages including references could be considered a probable target. Like any linguistics paper, a thesis should identify a research question and provide an overview of the literature on the subject. Beyond this, the components of the paper will depend on the linguistic subfield. A student conducting an experiment, for instance, will need to include a description of the methodology, and a quantitative analysis of the results. The number and format of drafts required before final submission, and the dates they should be supplied, will be specified by the student’s thesis advisor.

3. When should I start preparing for LIN 499?

As early as you can, within reason, although you most likely won’t officially enroll in LIN 499 until the fall or spring of your senior year. Well before your senior year, however, try to identify (i) a professor with whom you would like to work (see point 4) and (ii) an area/some areas of investigation that you find especially attractive or interesting (point 5). If you think it’s likely that you’ll be working with any of the kinds of data below, you should start talking to potential advisors **at least in your junior year**. This is because such data may be subject to review by the University’s board of ethics, the Institutional Review Board. Preparing an application for review, and the review process itself, can take anywhere from 2 weeks to 3 months. It’s also because collecting and analyzing data takes more time than you might realize.

¹ <http://fod.msu.edu/oir/capstone-courses>. Retrieved March 20, 2014.

Some data types used in linguistic research

- corpus data (online corpora, parsed syntactic corpora, corpora of letters or plays etc)
- online media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube etc)
- recorded speech (interviews, word lists, elicitation)
- experimental data (judgments, reaction tests, perception tasks etc)
- observations in schools and/or of children
- ethnographic fieldwork
- surveys, whether online or in hard copy

4. How do I find an advisor?

Ask a linguistics professor directly if they would be willing to supervise you. Make an appointment to talk to them in their office hours. Bring your initial ideas (no matter how vague) for discussion. In the Linguistics program, a professor usually doesn't supervise more than 4 theses per year. Professors also go on leave sometimes, or have commitments that don't allow them to take on many theses. So ask early, ideally a year in advance of the semester you want to write the thesis. Of course, you can change your mind if your interests change too, but be aware that if you do this too late, you run the risk of missing out on a suitable advisor and you might have to work with someone who is less appropriate for your research area. It's a good idea to build up relationships with professors in the program over the course of your major, as this will give you a better sense of your (and their!) interests. Volunteer in a lab. Get involved in qUALMs. Visit professors in their office hours. Go and listen when they give a talk.

5. What kind of research can I do?

This depends a lot on your area of interest, and the expectations within that area. Here are some examples of theses written by Linguistics majors:

- Sociolinguistic distribution and pragmatic functions of the discourse particle *yeah-no* in the MICASE corpus of academic English
- The perception of /æ/-fronting as urban or rural among Michigan listeners
- Who the @#!&% * are you?: The role of swearing in the construction of gender stereotypes
- The phonology and morphology of Tsou
- Benefits of a Sound System: An Analysis of Cochlear Implant Speech
- The Singer's Formant: Exploring the resonance and formant patterns in the high soprano vocal register
- Production and perception of homophonous words in English
- Perception of Phonemic and Allophonic Contrasts in Spanish