

Linguistics and Philosophy

Course 24

As its name suggests, the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy houses a linguistics section and a philosophy section. Though they share a number of intellectual interests and a joint undergraduate major, these two sections are administratively autonomous with separate chairpersons, faculties and graduate programs.

One goal of linguistics is to develop a general theory that reveals the rules and laws that govern the structure of a given language, and the general laws and principles governing all natural languages. Philosophical study aims at a general and systematic view of what we may know and think and what we may aspire to. The department offers a number of introductory subjects in both fields. These subjects have no prerequisites, but experience at the introductory level is usually required for more advanced work.

Undergraduate Program

Major in Philosophy

This traditional undergraduate philosophy major is designed to provide familiarity with the history and current status of the main problems in epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics; mastery of some of the technical skills requisite for advanced work in philosophy; facility at independent philosophical study; and work at an advanced level in an allied field. A relatively large amount of unrestricted elective time is available so that students can devise programs suited to individual needs and interests. The philosophy major is ideal for students who find themselves asking questions about the nature, purpose, and foundations of the disciplines they study, or about the objectivity and rationale for their moral, social, and political beliefs.

Major in Linguistics and Philosophy

This major, also known as the Program in Language and Mind, aims to provide students with a working knowledge of a variety of issues that currently occupy the intersection of philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive science. Central among these topics are the nature of language, of those mental representations that we call

“knowledge” and “belief,” and of the innate basis for the acquisition of certain types of knowledge (especially linguistic knowledge). Students have the option of pursuing either a philosophy track or a linguistics track. Both require a core set of subjects drawn from both fields and are designed to teach students the central facts and issues in the study of language and the representation of knowledge. Each track requires, in addition, a set of subjects drawn primarily from its discipline and is designed to prepare students for graduate study either in philosophy/cognitive science, or in linguistics. A coherent program of three restricted electives (drawn from one or two of the following three areas: linguistics, philosophy, or a related area) rounds out the major.

Minor in Linguistics or in Philosophy

Undergraduates may elect to minor in a designated area of the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS). The minor programs require students to complete six subjects in a given field from a curriculum arranged into at least three levels (tiers), expressing different degrees of sophistication in the articulation and resolution of intellectual problems. Students electing a minor program in linguistics or in philosophy will begin to acquire mature competence in its practice. Students who complete the minor program will satisfy the HASS concentration requirement in that field of study. They will also have the minor specified on their undergraduate degree.

Concentration in Linguistics or in Philosophy

Concentration in either field requires the selection of three subjects distributed along pre-determined criteria toward a certain degree of breadth and depth.

Contact Information

More information about the undergraduate program and about MIT’s offering in linguistics and philosophy may be obtained from the MIT Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Room 32-D808, Cambridge, MA 02139-4307, (617) 253-9372. Information is also available on the web at

<http://web.mit.edu/linguistics/www/> and at
<http://web.mit.edu/philos/www/>.

The MIT Bulletin, Courses and Degree Programs Issue, contains further information on the Institute, including all graduate and undergraduate courses and programs. For details on ordering the course catalogue, please contact the MIT Communications Office, Building E28, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139-4307, (617) 253-2635.

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