

## Department of Linguistics and Philosophy

The [Department of Linguistics and Philosophy](#) is divided into two sections consisting of 27 faculty members, 74 graduate students, two dozen or so visiting scientists and scholars, an administrative officer, an academic administrator, a systems administrator, one laboratory manager, and four support staff members. Each section operates independently, yet there is significant overlap of intellectual interests in education and research spanning the faculty, graduate students, and visitors.

### Research: Linguistics

Research by MIT's linguists continues to develop and test accounts of the representational and computational properties of the languages of the world. The department's overarching research goal is to understand the human capacity for language. Important questions include:

- Which properties of language are uniform across the human species?
- Which properties of language play out differently in the languages of the world, and how?
- What does the interplay of uniformity and diversity in language structure teach us about language acquisition and learning?
- How do these properties of language interact with other cognitive systems?

Specific, testable proposals are explored, developed, and challenged by students, faculty, and visiting scientists and scholars who are pursuing research on syntax, semantics, pragmatics, morphology, phonology, phonetics, and the interfaces among these systems.

The department also provides students and faculty with support for experimental research and computational modeling in language acquisition and phonetic, syntactic, and semantic processing. Facilities within the department include the Language Acquisition Lab, the Experimental Syntax and Semantics Lab, and the Phonetics Lab. Experimental and computational research is also conducted in collaboration with colleagues from the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences and the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, especially the Speech Group and other colleagues focusing on language acquisition, variation, and change.

Fieldwork on less-studied and endangered languages is an important research emphasis for many students and visitors. A feature of this research is a simultaneous emphasis on documentation and specific scientific questions of linguistic interest. Recent dissertations reflecting these twin goals have reported findings on languages as diverse as Dinka (Nilotic, Sudan), Tlingit (Na-Dené, Alaska), Chol and Tseltal (Mayan, Chiapas), Quechua (Bolivia), and Zulu (Bantu, South Africa). In addition, the MIT Indigenous Languages Initiative, a master's of science degree program begun in fall 2004, has graduated several students from communities attempting to revive indigenous languages.

## Research: Philosophy

Philosophy at MIT studies a diverse range of central topics and is characterized by a rigorous analytic approach. Among the topics currently pursued are consciousness and the mind-body problem, language and communication, self-knowledge, ethics and practical rationality, the nature of race and gender, mathematical logic (including formal theories of truth), “possible worlds” semantics for modal and conditional logic, perceptual knowledge, the nature of time, and the role of mathematics in science.

## Diversity Workshop

In 2015, in collaboration with the Philosophy Department of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, a group of students organized a summer institute for members of underrepresented minority groups: Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute (PIKSI-Boston). PIKSI brings 20 students, five diverse faculty from the region, and four teaching assistants, to campus for a week. They attend classes panels on graduate school and professional life and participate in fun activities. Students are paired with mentors who provide guidance and help them with their writing and, eventually, graduate school applications. Some of the sessions have been recorded so that informational panel discussions can be made available to a wider public.

In the initial effort, Professor Sally Haslanger worked with the American Philosophical Association and the board of an existing PIKSI at Pennsylvania State University to submit a proposal to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for funds to support efforts to promote diversity in philosophy. Philosophy is arguably the least racially diverse of all disciplines in the academy, including science and engineering. The Mellon Foundation awarded the American Philosophical Association \$600,000 for a wide range of efforts, among them PIKSI-Boston. Then-Dean Deborah Fitzgerald was a key support for PIKSI-Boston and the Mellon grant, offering \$15,000 for three years. In addition, the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy committed \$5,000 for three years, plus staff support. In 2017, the American Philosophical Association and the Mellon Foundation renewed the funding for three years, as did Dean Melissa Nobles and the Linguistics and Philosophy Department. PIKSI-Boston was again successful in the summer of 2018 and two years of funding remain.

During academic year 2019, the PIKSI-Boston board worked to create a consortium of schools in the Boston area to sustain the program for the foreseeable future with continuous three-year commitments to funding. Each year, the board invites philosophers and administrators from around Boston to an end-of-session party, hoping to encourage future participation in the PIKSI-Boston consortium.

## Publications

Faculty on both sides of the department participated in numerous colloquia and acted as keynote speakers at conferences and workshops throughout the United States and the world. A number of faculty members served as editors or members of editorial boards for numerous journals both in the United States and abroad. They also published a large number of journal articles, book chapters, and reviews. Publications during the last academic year included books by Associate Dean Agustín Rayo (*On the Brink*

*of Paradox: Highlights from the Intersection of Philosophy and Mathematics*, MIT Press), Professor Sally Haslanger (*Four Views on Race*, with Joshua Glasgow, Chike Jeffers, and Quayshawn Spencer, Oxford University Press), Professor Kieran Setiya (*Midlife: A Philosophical Guide*, Princeton University Press, with Italian and Korean translations), and Professor Bradford Skow (*Causation, Explanation, and the Metaphysics of Aspect*, Oxford University Press).

### **Honors and Awards**

Associate Dean Agustín Rayo was elected to the Norwegian Academic of Science and Letters. Professor Sally Haslanger was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Professor Stephen Yablo was awarded the American Philosophical Association Lebowitz Prize for Philosophy (with Professor Kit Fine from New York University), and a conference for Yablo was organized at University College Dublin. Associate Professor Miriam Schoenfield was the Gave and Clark Lecturer at Indiana University. Professor Emerita Judith Thomson was elected to the American Philosophical Society.

### **Leaves of Absence**

Professor David Pesetsky and Professor Kai von Fintel were on sabbatical leave for the fall semester. Professor Sally Haslanger had a Guggenheim Fellowship for the academic year to allow her to complete a book on social practices and social structure. Associate Professor Miriam Schoenfield was on a Junior Faculty Research Leave in the fall semester and on an Old Dominion Leave in the spring semester.

### **Personnel**

The department has two faculty members who are members of minority groups and six female faculty members. Efforts to recruit qualified women and minority candidates will continue. The Linguistics Section conducted a successful search for a junior faculty member, hiring Athulya Aravind as an assistant professor beginning July 1, 2019. The Philosophy Section will shortly lose Associate Professor Miriam Schoenfield, who is returning next spring to the University of Texas at Austin for personal reasons, and Professor Stephen Yablo, who is going to be on long-term disability after next year.

**Alex Byrne**

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