

## Department of Linguistics and Philosophy

The [Department of Linguistics and Philosophy](#) is divided into two sections consisting of 27 faculty members, 74 graduate students, approximately two dozen visiting scientists and scholars, an administrative officer, an academic administrator, a systems administrator, two lab managers, and four support staff members. Each section operates independently, yet between them there is a 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 of its properties are uniform across the human species? Which of its properties 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 visitors 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 Brain and Cognitive Science and 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, a master of science degree program—which began 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. Current research areas include 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; the semantics of conditional statements; perceptual knowledge; the nature of time; and the role of mathematics in science.

## Diversity Workshop

Philosophy is arguably the least racially diverse of all disciplines in the academy, including science and engineering. To help address this problem, in 2015 a group of philosophy graduate students collaborated with MIT Philosophy and the University of Massachusetts-Boston's Philosophy Department to organize Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute (PIKSI), a summer institute for members of underrepresented groups. PIKSI brings 20 students, five diverse faculty from the region, and four teaching assistants to campus for a week. They attend classes and panels on graduate school and professional life. Students are paired with mentors who provide guidance and help them with their writing and, eventually, also with graduate school applications. Some of the panel sessions have been recorded to make them available to a wider public.

In the initial effort, Professor Sally Haslanger worked with the American Philosophical Association (APA) and the board of an existing PIKSI at Pennsylvania State University to submit a proposal to the Mellon Foundation for funds to support efforts to promote diversity in philosophy. Mellon awarded the APA \$600,000 for a wide range of efforts, among them PIKSI-Boston. Deborah K. Fitzgerald—then the Kenan Sahin Dean of MIT's School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences—was a key support for PIKSI-Boston and the Mellon grant, offering \$15,000 for three years; the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy committed \$5,000 for three years, plus staff support. In 2017, the APA and Mellon Foundation renewed the funding for three years as did Dean Melissa Nobles and the department.

The summer of 2020 was to be our last summer of funding, but due to the COVID crisis, this summer's Institute was canceled. It was rescheduled for 2021 and occurred virtually, due to MIT's COVID restrictions. Dean Nobles has agreed to contribute \$20,000 (an increase of \$5,000) and the Philosophy Department \$5,000 for five years, from 2021–2025. With assistance and support from the Dean's Office, Professor Haslanger is drafting a Memorandum of Agreement that would set up a consortium of colleges and universities in the area to support PIKSI-Boston for five more years, renewable.

## 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 our faculty served as editors and/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 in the last academic year included Professor Tamar Schapiro's *Feeling like It: A Theory of Inclination and Will* and translations of Professor Kieran Setiya's *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* into Thai, Turkish, and Portuguese.

## Honors and Awards

Professor Agustín Rayo's book *On the Brink of Paradox* won the 2020 PROSE award for best humanities textbook. Professor Sally Haslanger was the graduation speaker at the City University of New York (CUNY) Department of Philosophy. She received the Infinite Mile Award for Innovation and Creativity as part of the D-Lab academic team

and also the Teaching with Digital Technology Award for *Gender and Development* (with Libby McDonald, co-teacher). Professor Donca Steriade was elected as honorary member of the Association for Laboratory Phonology. Professor Sabine Iatridou was awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship.

### **Leaves of Absence 2020**

Professor Agustín Rayo was on a dean's leave in the fall and a sabbatical leave in the spring. Professor Daniel Fox was on sabbatical leave for the academic year. Professor Stephen Yablo was on sabbatical leave for the spring. Assistant Professor E. J. Green was on parental leave for the spring semester.

### **Personnel**

Currently there are two minority and six female faculty members in the department. Our efforts to recruit qualified women and minority candidates will continue.

In academic year 2019–2020, the Philosophy Section ran a search for a tenure track junior faculty member and an open rank faculty position. Sam Berstler was hired as an assistant professor with a start date of July 1, 2021. An offer was made for the open rank faculty position, but in the end the candidate declined. The Philosophy Section and the MIT Schwarzman College of Computing (SCC) also ran a search for a tenure track assistant professor position that did not yield a viable candidate. New searches will be conducted in 2021–2022 for both the joint position with Philosophy/SCC and the Philosophy open rank faculty and junior faculty positions. The Linguistics Section also ran a search for a tenure track junior faculty member and hired Amir Anvari, to begin January 1, 2022.

**Alex Byrne**

**Professor of Philosophy**

**Head, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy**