Proposal to Restructure the UW-Madison Linguistics Department into the Language Sciences Program

A group of faculty from the Departments of Linguistics, Communication Sciences & Disorders, English, Psychology, Spanish & Portuguese, and German, Nordic, Slavic propose to create a new interdisciplinary program called Language Sciences. Once established, this academic unit will assume the academic programs and subject listing currently administered by the Linguistics Department. Program faculty in the new unit will also assume responsibility for Linguistics’ resources and the academic program review currently underway, and will seek permission to serve as a tenure home for the 3.5 faculty members currently in that department. The Linguistics Department will, by separate action, then be closed.

Faculty representing the language sciences have endorsed creation of this department-like unit as the best means to pursue several goals:

- To strengthen and broaden the academic study of linguistics, as currently found in the undergraduate major, MA, PhD, and PhD Minor in Linguistics, via strategic expansion and better coordination of courses and instruction offered in the discipline.
- To promote, support, and strengthen a cross-disciplinary approach to the study of human language, enhancing research and connection among scholars tenured in a wide array of units studying language at UW-Madison, thereby unifying otherwise atomized language scientists into a sizable program with the potential to become a national leader.
- To provide sound faculty governance for the academic programs and budgetary resources associated with the above.

Faculty who will be engaged in Language Sciences value and support the variety of approaches to the study of language as pursued by both linguists and language scientists, reaching beyond the borders of the current Linguistics Department, to include teaching and scholarship found in units such as English, Psychology, Communication Sciences and Disorders, and others, all of which apply their focus to particular aspects of human language.

Discussions that led to this proposal have been under way for many years, beginning formally in the Linguistics Department in fall 2013, and also including a Language Sciences Working Group convened by the Language Institute, which met in AY 2014-2015. During the Spring 2016 semester, a draft proposal to substantially restructure governance in the Linguistics Department, and grant full and renewable faculty governance status to faculty who did not have tenure in the Department was explored. This novel governance structure was pursued because although faculty outside of the Department of Linguistics were enthusiastic to join in the reorganizing of the department, none were interested in transferring parts of their tenure lines. Reasons for the reluctance to move tenure lines as part of the reorganization revolved around departmental resources, new teaching metrics, and simple loyalty to current departmental homes. Nevertheless, all faculty involved want to create a governance structure for a new unit that does not distinguish between faculty based on tenure lines and thus treats all dedicated faculty members equally.

Today, the study of linguistics, transcends individual languages and specific aspects of language, offering foundational tools from a perspective that benefits such diverse areas of research and knowledge as first and second language acquisition, education, philosophy, language pathologies, psychology, sociology, anthropology, computer science, gender studies, among many others.

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Linguistics conceived in this manner has inherent value as a science, by which we mean the systematic study of human language through documentation and analysis in order to discover what is common to all human languages, what is unique to each human language, how language is learned and how both biology and culture interact to create human language. When envisioned as the inquiry into these broad properties of human language, it is a science in which UW–Madison is poised to be a leader.

The goal of this proposal is to break from the past and revitalize linguistics at UW–Madison by creating a new interdisciplinary academic structure with three primary goals: (1) to ensure high quality instruction and research in the core unique areas of linguistics associated with the academic programs in the Linguistics Department, and to link this core to a more expansive vision of Language Science; (2) to provide a stable structure that will facilitate, support, and coordinate interdisciplinary research, teaching, service, and outreach related to language; and (3) to support both of these endeavors via sound faculty governance of the academic programs and budgetary resources entrusted to Language Sciences. The majority of UW–Madison language scientists are found outside the Linguistics Department. Today, topics in linguistics – phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and the social & cultural contexts of linguistic production – are taught in a variety of departments, without coordination. The Language Sciences Program that engages these faculty, their departments, and students will provide a mechanism for collaboration, which in turn will allow the faculty to better coordinate course offerings, reduce or eliminate redundancy, and pool teaching and research resources. Enrollment pooling and new teaching flexibilities will allow some linguistics topics that were dropped due to the small faculty size to be reintroduced to the curriculum, and create new areas of programmatic strength. After completing the restructuring of the Linguistics Department through formation of Language Sciences, academic program review will provide the groundwork for revising the undergraduate and graduate curricula as needed.

The name Language Sciences is the ecumenical name that represents our goals. All members have teaching and research interests in human language so “language” should be a part of the name. All members ascribe to a scientific approach in their research represented in theoretical, empirical and documentary approaches. We are consciously avoiding using the term “linguistics” due to its potentially divisive nature, in so much as it connotes a narrower approach to the study of language than the program invites. We understand that, for purposes of administrative categorization for the type of academic unit this will be, we must propose a formal name of Language Sciences Program; however, we hope to adopt Language Sciences as a short version of our official name.

The mission of the Language Sciences Program is to promote and pursue excellence in teaching, research, service, and outreach related to human language across the UW-Madison campus. Language Sciences recognizes that excellence in theoretical and documentary linguistics is best achieved by taking advantage of the inherently cross-disciplinary nature of human language. This viewpoint makes Language Sciences a natural home for the linguistics degree programs. A unique and separate administrative unit is necessary to pursue this mission because all of the current administrative units that do contain linguists (e.g. English, Psychology, German, etc.) have their own, distinct missions. An additional key aspect of the mission of Language Sciences is the dedication to supporting and promoting other units that are involved in work on human language.

We believe that the best community of people who work on language is one that is ecumenical and supports the diversity in research, teaching, service and outreach that is represented by focused approaches. Language Sciences will promote vigorous exploration of the results of “other” disciplines for all who investigate human language at UW-Madison. The education of students in
the linguistics programs, both in research and in the classroom, will reflect this cross-disciplinary stance by fostering a strong core of theoretical and descriptive linguistic knowledge with an outward interest in taking advantage of the strengths and insights from other disciplines focused on language.

Both the undergraduate and graduate programs in linguistics are extremely healthy, despite the small number of faculty members in the department. The subject listing is small, with 38 active courses focused on core linguistics and directed study/mentoring courses. Overall, it is focused on traditional approaches to the discipline, and Linguistics students have long augmented Linguistics offerings with courses taken outside the department. The effect has been to produce a de facto interdisciplinary program, but with less intention and guidance than we hope to achieve with the establishment of Language Sciences. The new program will revitalize linguistics on campus by following the current cross-disciplinary turn that linguistics as a field is taking. The breadth of the current faculty who will participate (and who are interested in participating) in Language Sciences will help ensure the continuing strength of the academic programs by adding teaching and research talents to the pool of resources. In addition, as new faculty participate in program governance, we anticipate that our faculty will make their department’s linguistics courses available to Linguistics majors, which would reflect more completely the research and expertise of the language science faculty on campus. Since Language Sciences will be an independent unit, the other units that faculty belong to do not need to alter their practices, and the likely effect on other units will be positive ones such as increased enrollments in classes. Language Sciences will therefore assume responsibility for the subject listing, the undergraduate major, graduate degree, and graduate minor programs. We do not anticipate any need to suspend admission to these programs, to substantially change requirements, or to change the names of the programs. Language Sciences will continue to offer the courses required in the programs, to provide student advising and mentoring, and otherwise maintain our obligations to our students. We hope the transition to the new administrative structure will be fairly seamless for them.

The final proposed Linguistics/Language Sciences reorganization plan (a longer version of the above) was unanimously approved by departmental faculty vote on February 18, 2018 (17 yes, 1 advisory yes, 0 no, no abstentions). It has also been endorsed by the full departmental membership (faculty, academic staff, university staff), the Language Institute, and graduate students. The voting members of the L&S APC approved this request unanimously, hoping that restructuring could happen at a pace that would allow for implementation by July 1, 2018. On April 19, 2017, the UAPC approved the restructuring, contingent on a Faculty Senate reading and University Committee (UC) approval of current departmental faculty’s tenure status. The UC recognizes the L&S APC wish to have this restructuring implemented at the end of this fiscal year, and further recognizes the need to allow the unit to go through its planning and rebranding. Conversely, the UC feels that additional study is needed on the issue of department-like bodies and tenure before making any final decisions on the broader matter of tenure homes outside departments. To avoid a series of one-time exceptions to a rule that has not yet been fully defined while also affording this unit to continue its restructuring, the UC (1) advances the Language Sciences proposal to the Senate for a May 2018 reading, along with its decision to approve the transition of the current tenured members of the department into the program, and (2) will appoint an ad hoc committee to study the topic of departments, department-like bodies, and tenure in the coming academic year.