What is General Linguistics?

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Linguistics is the scientific study of language. General Linguistics approaches language as a general, species-wide phenomenon, and the field is different in this regard from linguistics and philology programs that are dedicated to specific languages or specific language families (e.g. German Studies, Slavic Linguistics etc.; in German: Germanistik, Slawistik, etc.). These specific programs are chiefly interested in describing the unique properties of a given language or language family and the contingencies of its history, while General Linguistics is chiefly interested in general patterns that shape each and every language, both in their current structure (synchrony) and in their historical developments (diachrony). In other words, General Linguistics is a discipline that seeks to formulate general principles of language, whereas language-specific programs seek to understand an individual language or language family in and by themselves. The kinds of principle that are studied in General Linguistics cover the nature of the language faculty and the architecture of grammar, the evolution and history of languages, general patterns in the acquisition of languages by children and adults, and the relationship of languages with social and cultural structures on the one hand, and with patterns in cognition and the brain on the other hand.

However, the empirical foundation of General Linguistics is ultimately individual languages and their histories. Therefore, a general linguist is typically also concerned with detailed research on individual languages. Because the large languages of Europe and elsewhere (English, French, Chinese, etc.) are typically already covered by language-specific programs, general linguists usually study less well-known languages when they seek to expand their database. An important part of a general linguist’s research activities therefore involves fieldwork on under-researched, and often endangered, languages world-wide (for current field sites at the UZH department, see http://www.ivs.uzh.ch/de/research.html)

While General Linguistics is traditionally limited to the study of human languages, more recently (and especially at UZH), general linguists have also started to study the communication systems of other species, together with behavioral and evolutionary biologists.

An education in General Linguistics includes the study of the key dimensions along which languages tend to be organized:

- phonetics (the study of speech production and perception)
- phonology (how sounds or gestures function together in differentiating words)
- morphology (the formation and composition of words)
- syntax (the formation and composition of sentences)
• semantics (the study of meaning)
• pragmatics (how context influences meaning)

Cross-cutting these dimensions are specialized (but often overlapping) sub-disciplines that examine linguistic structures from different perspectives:

• historical linguistics: individual languages and their relations over time
• linguistic typology: the distribution and evolution of structural types worldwide
• sociolinguistics: language from a social perspectives
• anthropological linguistics: the relations between language, culture and evolution
• psycholinguistics: language from cognitive and neurobiological perspectives
• computational linguistics: language as a computational problem
• corpus linguistics: patterns in discourse, typically using statistical methods
• philology: individual languages in historical texts

Linguistics is part of a general group of language sciences which also include research in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, computer science, biology and many more.

What General Linguistics is NOT:

• Like other linguists, a general linguist is not interested in teaching how to speak “correctly” or how to best express oneself. Linguists see language as an object of scientific study, not as something they wish to actively change and shape because of what they happen to like or not like.
• General Linguistics is not merely the study of languages by people who love to learn as many languages as possible (although a strong interest in and passion for languages of course helps!). General linguistics requires a comparative, generalist view. Each of the 7000 languages found on the planet is of equal interest to the general linguist, and general linguists aim to build databases with information on as many languages as possible.
• General Linguistics is not limited to qualitative and interpretative methods but also makes heavy use of statistics, logic and mathematics. If you hated math in school, General Linguistics may not be the right choice for you! A love for languages or cultures, or a feeling of ‘I am good at languages’ alone is not enough for studying General Linguistics.
• General Linguistics is not the study of different literatures. Literary studies employ different methods and pursue different goals from linguistics. This does not mean that data from literary works are necessarily excluded from linguistic studies, but that linguistics looks at these data from a different perspective than literary studies.
• General Linguistics does not directly lead to a profession in language teaching or language pedagogics. While a deep understanding of how language works is certainly necessary for these careers, General Linguistics is not an applied but a theoretical discipline.
Linguistics is certainly not a good way to become rich! Academic positions are rare, especially permanent ones. In their career, linguists have to be ready to work on positions that last for a three year period or less and to change not only the employer, but also the country of residence frequently.

**General Linguistics at UZH:**

The Department of Comparative Linguistics at UZH is a research-oriented institute and teaching is tightly integrated with research. The foci of the General Linguistics group at UZH include the following three points, representing the three main steps in linguistic analysis:

- Qualitative analysis of endangered and less well-studied languages, and the development of databases and corpora based on this
- Quantitative methods for general historical linguistics and typology, language acquisition and phonetics
- Theories explaining the world-wide distribution of language structures; theories of the perception and production of linguistic sounds; theories of language acquisition

In terms of sub-disciplines, the following fields are most prominently represented in the department:

- Typology: the study of why the structures of languages are distributed in the world the way they are: what is universal, what is regional, and why and how have these patterns developed?
- Psycholinguistics: The study of language and the brain, and especially language processing and language acquisition in different cultural environments.
- Phonetics: The study of the physical properties of speech sounds, drawing heavily on physics. This involves the application of various technical recording tools and the computerized analysis of the collected data.
- Language documentation: Several members of the department are actively involved in fieldwork, collecting data from different little-known languages. The main research areas include South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

**Prospective students**

Prospective students should seriously consider the nature of the department’s foci on theory and on qualitative and, particularly, quantitative analyses in the scientific study of language. These foci presuppose a strong interest not only in languages per se, but also a strong commitment to the acquisition of a wide range of analytical and statistical methods and various computational and technical tools.

Students in the Department of Comparative Linguistics at the University of Zurich attain basic knowledge in General Linguistics in the core dimensions of language, as listed above.
In addition, the curriculum draws heavily on statistics (both descriptive and inferential), methods in data science (e.g. computer programming, data mining, regular expressions), experimental methods and methods for fieldwork and corpus development.

Students attend introductory classes on the core dimensions of linguistic structure, such as introductions to morphology or phonetics, which are followed by specialized courses in fields including psycholinguistics and anthropological linguistics. In addition to the general program, students are also required to learn at least one non-European or, if European, non-Indo-European language. This allows students to gain first-hand insight into the workings of a language that is drastically different from the languages they already know.

As the texts to be read in the different courses are almost exclusively in English, good reading command of English is absolutely necessary for prospective students. The courses are typically taught in either German or English, which makes sufficient skills in understanding and communicating in both languages a prerequisite.

The program is challenging, but rewarding for those interested in academic careers in linguistics, including teaching at university level, language documentation, and other language-related research programs. General Linguistics does not directly prepare the students for a career outside of academia, so prospective major students should be ready to embark on an academic career, with all its advantages and drawbacks.

If you are studying to become a language teacher, a broad background in the core areas of linguistics may be useful, but advanced studies in quantitative analysis may not be as beneficial for course room instruction in second language teaching programs, etc. Those students may wish to take the small minor.

If you are particularly interested in the study of one specific language or a few closely related languages, then it is better to enroll in a specialized program, such Romance, Slavic, English or German – or combine this with General Linguistics as a minor.