

Personal Statement

2013, Linguistics, Newnham College

As a native speaker in a Finno-Ugric language that does not show any similarities to its neighbours, I have found studying two Germanic languages a thought-provoking experience. I have had the chance to examine how a mostly isolating language differs from an agglutinative one, how Hungarians learning English find the same aspects - the 'th' sounds or the present perfect tense - difficult, and the kind of misconceptions - English being supposedly much easier and quicker to learn than German - usually arise. All this, along with the study of my own language has made me ask questions about, and take a closer look at language itself – a uniquely human gift.

For me languages have never been just a means of communication, which is why I decided to take part in the National Hungarian Language Competition. My topic of Hungarian verbal particles and postpositions allowed me to examine language from a historical viewpoint by researching how these two parts of speech evolved through grammaticalization. The very apparent neologisms which first made me enthusiastic about the area culminated in the strongly debated question of language planning. I discovered how there had always been arguments about linguistics having to be prescriptive to some extent, while at the same time others argued for its merely descriptive role. I also encountered this controversy when creating my own survey for the competition, as respondents' answers differed significantly according to their age group, and from the suggestions made by professional linguists.

Seeking to combine my interests in linguistics and foreign languages, I read and particularly enjoyed David Crystal's work, 'The English Language'. It was fascinating to see how pronunciation is of a great sociolinguistic importance in English, which could never be imagined in my mother tongue. Yet, at the same time I delighted in identifying the changes that both languages were undergoing, most prominently those caused by the effects of technology.

'The Language Instinct' by Steven Pinker inspired me a great deal, especially the section on the relation between mind and language, by the end of which Pinker essentially proves that Orwell's Newspeak would not have restricted the thoughts of people in any way. Striving to know more about the issue, I read the debate between Lera Boroditsky and Mark Liberman, which made me fully appreciate how linguistics is not a discipline of general truths. It was intriguing to see both researchers reject 'Whorfian' thinking, yet disagree on the extent to which language either 'shaped' or simply 'nudged' thought, including fundamental areas of our lives from perception to navigation and social evaluation.

I have been fortunate enough to teach English to primary school students in a summer camp three times, which helped me to consolidate my knowledge of English and also encouraged me to further my interest in language acquisition. Aspiring to delve into this topic I read 'The Infinite Gift' and was amazed by all the examples Charles Yang used to support his claim of children acquiring their first language not by learning it, but by unlearning all the others.

This academic year I am planning to continue tutoring pupils in English besides improving my German skills and acquainting myself with another foreign language. I have long been impressed by the Cyrillic alphabet and the way a number of Slavic languages are mutually intelligible. For these reasons I will be studying Russian, as well as undertaking an 'Introduction to Linguistics' course at my local university. Both of these will serve as excellent preparation for my proposed further studies.

I believe that linguistics is a fast-growing multi-disciplinary area of science, and research into it will not only affect everyday life, but will allow humanity to discover more about itself. Studying it at tertiary level would help me to realise my full potential, and I would relish the opportunity to do so at your institution.