

Should I do an Honours Degree? Some Unofficial Advice

Many students who are interested in Linguistics wonder whether they should pursue an Honours degree in the subject, or stick with a Major or Minor. Each student will have his or her own factors to consider in this decision, but a number of general concerns tend to come up for most students considering a switch to Honours. This document summarizes some of the main issues.

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

As the name implies, Honours students must meet high academic standards. In Linguistics, we do not insist on any formal entrance qualifications for Honours, but you will not graduate with an Honours degree if you do not meet these standards. First of all, you have to take twenty courses in Linguistics, amounting to 60 credits, including your six-credit Honours thesis. The courses are listed on the Linguistics Department website: <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/programs/linguistics/PROGRAMS/HONOURS.HTM> Second, you have to maintain a GPA of 3.3 (B+) in your Linguistics courses. Third, you have to get at least a B+ in all but one of Phonetics, Phonology, Syntax and Semantics, as well as in your thesis. Students not meeting these requirements, even if they have passed all of the twenty courses, will graduate with a Major in Linguistics (providing the relevant

coursework in a particular area. Thus, an Honours degree may mean more to Canadian graduate programs than to American ones.

You should also remember that there are other ways to get experience in independent research, together with a letter of recommendation from someone who has supervised that research. Many upper-level seminars require substantial research papers that are similar to an Honours thesis, if on a smaller scale. This is particularly true of a paper written for LING 488 or 489, the Independent Study courses, where the paper is normally the entire basis for your grade. A Major who has taken one or more of these courses, then, might be in a similar position to an Honours student in terms of research experience.

Finally, it should be recalled that, while graduating with Honours necessarily entails maintaining a high GPA, it does not guarantee a higher GPA than a student graduating with a Major. On the contrary, some of the highest GPAs in each year's crop of students graduating in Linguistics are held by Majors, or even Minors, rather than by Honours students.

Doing Honours, therefore, doesn't demonstrate that you're necessarily better or brighter than other students who don't do Honours; it simply implies that you know more about Linguistics. The disadvantage, as already mentioned, is that this may entail knowing less about other things. It's up to you to decide which is more important to you.