

Ling News

University of Connecticut, Department of Linguistics

KEEPING STUDENTS ENGAGED --AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIO VILLA-GARCÍA

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By **Ting Xu**

As PhD students who plan to survive in the academic world, we all understand the importance of teaching. We wonder how to make our class lively and interesting and how to keep our students engaged. During the winter break, I was lucky and honored to interview Julio Villa-García, who was recognized for excellence in teaching and recently received the *Arthur Abramson Award for Extraordinary Achievement in Teaching*. He is going to share with us some of his teaching experience and philosophy.



Q: You were recently recognized for good teaching. Do you believe that good teaching can be taught or is the old adage true, teachers are born?

A: At least effective instruction can be learned. Teaching training, reflecting on teaching while you are a student and a teacher, and teaching experience definitely help, but crucial traits such as interpersonal skills and sensitivity to people are difficult—if not impossible—to acquire through formal instruction. I think that being personable is something that either you develop when you are very young or you are born with it. Teaching has often been likened to acting—I guess actors have some special “genetic” endowment in some way or another.

Q: What did it feel like to stand in front of a classroom the first time? How did you mentally prepare for that?

A: I had been waiting for over 25 years to teach a class, so I could not have been more excited! I must admit that it's an awkward feeling at the beginning, though, in that you fully realize the challenge and responsibility you've taken on. Since you have different energy levels as you go along, it's somehow difficult to predict how you are going to feel during a class. I guess that it would be very challenging for me to teach if I didn't love it. As a graduate teacher, you are lucky that you don't have to teach 24/7, but you definitely have to be up there at the right times—you can't just re-schedule a class because you are going to feel more energized at 4.30 than at 12.30... As Harry van der Hulst once said to me, “teaching is energizing.” I couldn't agree more, so even when I don't feel in high spirits before going to class, after 1 or 2 minutes in the classroom, I “take off” and could continue teaching until I pass out. I think teaching is a nice complement to the challenging and likewise stimulating domain of research.

See *Keeping Students Engaged* on page 2

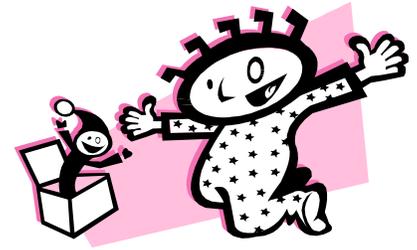
SPECIAL THANKS

I would like to thank Lyn Tieu for her generous contribution, Julio Villa-García for the interview and for proofreading the newsletter, and Susi Wurmbrand for offering great ideas!

KEEPING STUDENTS ENGAGED *CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1*

Q: Some students may complain that they were assigned to a class taught by a graduate student. What would you say to them about the advantages of having a graduate student as an instructor?

A: I would tell them that they are lucky they have somebody who is in between a teacher and a student. This means that the graduate instructor is very likely to display a high degree of sensitivity to students' level and way of life. Similarly, I would tell them that graduate students are most likely conducting research while they are teaching you, which means they are probably aware of the most recent developments in the field. Finally, I would say that in many cases, graduate students are closer in terms of age to the undergraduate students, which generally helps build rapport. I guess I would eventually tell them that the important thing is that they end up being taught by people who care, regardless of their status as graduate assistants or faculty members.



Q: What is the most important thing a teacher can convey to his class --- confidence? knowledge? excitement?

A: Well, confidence and knowledge are vital, but I think the most important thing is to spark your students' interest through your enthusiasm. If a teacher doesn't really and genuinely love *what* they teach and *how* they teach it, they shouldn't expect to motivate their students in any way. Linguistics can be a hard subject, but also a very enjoyable one, as we all know. Empowering your students is also important. For instance, an effective way of encouraging and engaging students is to quote them later in the course for their significant contributions (e.g. "As X pointed out on Tuesday...").

Q: Now that you have been teaching for a while, what advice would you give others who are interested in becoming professors? Is there anything you keep in mind every time you get up in front of the class? What tips can you offer others?

A: I have just been teaching for over a year and a half now, so I still have a long way to go. However, at this point certain things are clear to me. Teachers should view their students as intelligent human beings and not just as customers, or at least not as paying customers; they should never underestimate their students' abilities, even if those are not apparent at first sight; they should be accessible and remember that different people learn in different ways; they should keep in mind that, as Malcolm Forbes put it, "education's purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one;" and they should recall that linguistics is not the only class the students are taking. In this sense, connecting the material to bigger-picture issues is something students really appreciate. We are lucky in that the scientific nature of linguistics enables us to help students develop a number of transferrable skills, namely critical, out-of-the-box thinking and analytical reasoning beyond the contents of the course (after all a major aspect of a science class is the assessment of the arguments for and against competing proposals). This way of

thinking helps students anticipate and solve problems as well as think logically, even outside of linguistics and outside of college. One advantage of teaching linguistics is that language is arguably the most human characteristic, and much of the evidence adduced in linguistics is available in the real world—thus, using examples to which the students can relate is easy (for instance, using the fashionable word *Facebook*® to illustrate the morphological process of *zero-derivation* or *conversion*). This enables you to incorporate real-life examples and humor into the classroom, which is key to making the class enjoyable and stimulating interest, as well as building rapport. Besides, given that language can be explored from different vantage points, linguistics also allows the instructor to help students look at language with an eye on improving their speaking and writing skills. In sum, in addition to helping students "think linguistically," teachers should keep in mind that the ultimate objective should be to help students acquire and develop lifelong skills.



COME ONE, COME ALL - TO YOUR LOCAL COLLOQUIUM IN LINGUISTICS

By **Lyn Tieu** (on behalf of the Colloquium Committee)

Dear linguists,

The colloquium committee are all geared up for another semester of exciting talks, and we hope you are too! We'd like to thank you for making the last semester of talks a success. We might handle all the logistical details that go into planning the events, but without your attendance, your support, and your enthusiasm, they sim-

ply wouldn't be half of what they are. We were very pleased to see some great attendance at the last three talks, which featured Norvin Richards, Satoshi Tomioka, and Danny Fox. It was wonderful to see students coming out to lunch with us and the speakers, signing up for individual meetings with the speakers, attending the talks, and finally, sticking around for dinner! Last semester, we also started what we hope will become a good habit (yes, there is such a thing!) - a reading group that meets the week of each colloquium, to discuss relevant papers in preparation for the talk. A group of about 12 of us met over tea and cookies to discuss Danny Fox's work a few days before his colloquium, and we found the discussion both helpful and relaxing (the latter more likely due to the herbal tea than to any heated debates about presupposition projection!). We would like to continue these reading group gatherings this semester, and invite more of you to join us!

This semester, we are incredibly excited to feature the following speakers:

Martin Hackl (Feb. 4)
 Rolf Noyer (Feb. 25)
 Norbert Hornstein (Mar. 25)
 David Embick (Apr. 8)
 Nina Hyams (Apr. 22)

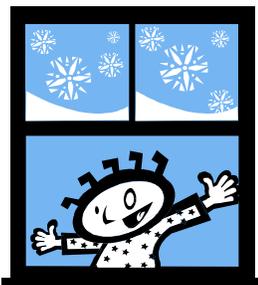
Stay tuned for more information, and we'll see you at the colloquia!
 -The Colloquium Committee



OUR VERY OWN LSA FELLOW - DIANE LILLO-MARTIN

By **Lyn Tieu**

Congratulations to our very own Diane Lillo-Martin, who was inducted as a Linguistic Society of America Fellow at the recent annual meeting of the LSA. Diane was among eight members of the Society who were recognized for their distinguished contributions to the discipline of Linguistics. This is a truly remarkable accomplishment, and we are very proud of Diane and her extraordinary achievements.



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Linguistics Rules!

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STUDENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS (SEP-DEC, 2010)

PUBLICATIONS

- Tieu, Lyn Shan. 2010. "Re-examining cross-linguistic influence in the bilingual acquisition of *wh*-questions." In Melinda Heijl, ed., *Proceedings of the 2010 Canadian Linguistic Association Annual Conference*. <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~cla-acl/actes2010/CLA2010_Tieu.pdf>
- Tieu, Lyn Shan. 2010. "On the tri-ambiguous status of *any*: The view from child language." In David Lutz and Nan Li, eds., *Proceedings of the 20th Semantics and Linguistic Theory Conference*.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- Bastos-Gee, Ana C. 2010. "Expressive content in DP-of-DP constructions in BP". *IV Workshop do Projeto temático da Universidade de São Paulo*. São Paulo, Brazil. December 1-3, 2010. (Partially funded by the host University).
- Otaki, Koichi. 2010. "Noun Raising in Child English". Poster presented at the *4th Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA-4)*, University of Toronto, September 2010.
- Otaki, Koichi. 2010. "Right Node Raising, Plurality, and Multiple Dominance". Paper presented at *the Western Conference on Linguistics 2010 (WECOL 2010)*, California State University, Fresno, November 2010.
- Runić, Jelena. 2010. "The Slavic PCC: The View from Morphology". Paper presented at *the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Slavic Linguistics Society*, University of Chicago, October 29-30, 2010.
- Tieu, Lyn Shan. 2010. "On the tri-ambiguous status of *any*: The view from child language." Paper presented at *the 4th Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition in North America (GALANA-4)*, University of Toronto, September 1, 2010.
- Xu, Ting. 2010. "Children's 2Aux negative questions: Parameter-setting or the lexicon?". Paper presented at *the Boston University Conference on Language Development 35 (BUCLD-35)*. Boston University. November 5-7, 2010.
- Xu, Ting. 2010. "What can't they do? On English children's negative questions". Paper presented at *the 41st Annual Meeting of North East Linguistic Society (NELS-41)*. University of Pennsylvania, October 22-24, 2010
- Xu, Ting, and William Snyder. 2010. "Children's 2Aux Negative Questions: Elicited Production versus Spontaneous Speech". Paper presented at *the 4th Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA-4)*. University of Toronto, September 1-3, 2010.



DEPARTMENTAL PRESENTATIONS

- Despić, Miloje. 2010. "Exactly How Invisible are Null Articles", Presentation given at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute (UCHI), September 21, 2010.

SERVICE

- Despić, Miloje. Co-organizer of the "Dissertation Fellowship Workshop" at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute (UCHI), November 3, 2010 (with Professor Sharon M. Harris and Michael E. Neagle). The purpose of this workshop was to help students apply for the next year's fellowship, to prepare their proposals.
- Despić, Miloje. Reviewer for the journal *The Linguistic Review*.