Teaching Statement

Maria Gouskova

My teaching goals vary depending on the level of the course. Our introductory course Language is the first and only linguistics course that many students will ever take. One cannot try to cover complex abstract theoretical problems, but I do survey a broad range of topics to give students a good feel for the diversity of the field. I also try to tie issues in linguistics to the real world—so, for example, I do sections on language policy in the US, bilingual education, and language evolution. An introductory course succeeds if students come away with a good understanding of how scientists think about language—whether we talk about language in the mind or language in society. It is great if some students decide to take more advanced courses, too— their interest has been piqued.

Phonological Analysis, a more specialized course, has a different goals. Linguistics is not a field in which memorization is helpful; there are facts to learn, but the main goal is to learn how to reason. We extract patterns from the data and construct a theory that makes the right predictions for the sound organization of language. I think that students can only learn phonological argumentation by solving lots of problems—it is easy to watch someone solve a problem on the board; it is something else to go home and solve an unfamiliar problem by yourself. In my own education, I noticed that learning one area in depth is more useful than doing a superficial survey of several areas. Thus, I do not aim to cover that many topics in phonological theory—interested students can take more advanced courses. I would rather my students learn three topics well than hear about fifteen topics and forget them as soon as the semester is over.

Strong students are allowed to do a final project instead of taking the final exam. They find their own data and construct a phonology problem from it that is similar to the problems I assign, and then solve it. This is a disguised term paper, and it is a harder assignment than many students realize. The problems are often quite good, and some of my students have gone on to develop their problem sets into honors theses. This is a transition from being a student to being a researcher, and so students have to learn the mechanics of linguistic research as well as the more high-level aspects of working with linguistic theories. I feel strongly that honors students must find the topics themselves. This way, they maintain an interest in the project, and they feel an ownership of their ideas, which they might not if the project had been assigned to them. Since students often do not know enough about the field to know what a good problem is, I help them navigate the literature, and I encourage them to enroll in graduate courses and our few undergraduate seminars, where they learn how to read and write academic research papers. I have only supervised two undergraduate honors theses so far, even though I have plenty of
experience advising graduate students. I expect an undergraduate thesis to demonstrate a solid understanding of a fairly complex problem and to display some independent thinking about it, if not necessarily to make a contribution to the field, as a graduate student might be expected to do. I am gratified that both of the students I supervised have decided to go on to academic careers in the field. This year, both Anna Greenwood and Amanda Rysling got accepted to top graduate programs.