

# FOCUS

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## Course demonstration explores nature of language

On March 18 in a hidden Doherty basement room, about 50 students listened intently to people speaking Cantonese, Mandarin, Yoruba, Argentine Spanish, German and Polish — six languages they didn't know from Urdu.

Their challenge was to decipher what they were hearing, based on what they had already learned about phonetics (sounds of a language), morphology (word structure of a language) and syntax (sentence structure of a language).

The Nature of Language (80-180) has been taught for the past three years by Carol Tenny, an adjunct professor in the Philosophy department. She started out teaching from a textbook, but adopted a hands-on approach as she came to understand that students learned better through application. Her teaching assistant, Keith Douglas, said that they "try to be as interactive as possible

and this is the most extreme sort."

The seven different foreign language speakers — two spoke German — were dispersed around the large room in corners and down the sides. Each of the seven was surrounded by an assigned group of students who asked questions and hurriedly scribbled answers on their handouts.

One requirement for the exercise was that the students had no prior experience in the language of the group they were in. The whole point was not to understand what the speaker was saying, but to decipher how the language worked as a system.

Tenny advised her students, "Try to arrange yourselves so that Argentine Spanish and Yoruba don't get mixed together."

Some of the speakers were Carnegie Mellon international students and faculty, while others were from outside the university. Tenny warned faculty members to keep

their expertise to themselves, so as not to give the students any hints. But they could repeat the sounds as much as the students needed because "You don't have to do it perfectly — you're not phoneticians."

The students used the phonetic alphabet to write down the sounds they heard, often asking their speakers to repeat a sound or a word that they missed. The students had a worksheet with English phrases and sentences. The speakers would speak the phrases and sentences in their language and the students had to figure out how the language worked by drawing connections.

The Argentine Spanish speaker, Professor Pascual Masullo from University of Pittsburgh, made sure the students knew that he was speaking Argentine Spanish, not European Spanish.

One student in the German group asked the speaker, "Can you say the black fish

cooks the black fish?" Later the student asked, "Would it be normal if someone came up to you and asked ..."

Tenny heard the student's questions and shouted encouraging words, letting him know he was on to something and that others should follow. The students were trying to figure out what was causing changes in the language, knowing that different languages have different syntax and morphology.

The man hits the woman, but what about the fish hits the woman?

Inquiring minds were figuring out the nature of language in a setting where six languages were being spoken at once and students were speaking nonsense about abusive fish in an interactive learning experience that everyone seemed to enjoy.

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