



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
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Department of Linguistics



CONVOCATION

Jesse Weir's MA Story

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How did you end up in linguistics and what was the journey like for you?

I took my first linguistics course in the Fall of 2016 because I was planning to pursue speech pathology. In that introductory course, I discovered just how well linguistics fit my brain. It was the perfect meeting point of math and writing for me and I instantly fell in love with

it. In the spring of 2019, I finally made the decision to pursue linguistics and apply for research grants related to work I had been interested in and it has all snowballed from there.

What was your experience like at SFU?

My experience in the MA program at SFU was unique to say the least. Because of the pandemic, the entirety of my coursework was completed remotely and (ideally) this will not be the case for people in the future. I enjoyed getting to know the faculty and the other students in my cohort. I just wish that I had been in-person for my entire degree and really had a chance to experience the campus in a more involved capacity.

Tell us what your thesis topic is about and what got you interested in the topic.

The topic of my MA thesis was an extension of work I had done as part of my undergraduate degree. My thesis is titled Imperative Phonetic Analysis. I looked at phonetic recordings of participants reading both null subject imperative sentences (Sit on the bench and wait) as well as imperative sentences with an overt second person pronoun subject (You sit on the bench and wait). The theory was that because these pairs of sentences have different underlying representations in the syntax, there may be an observable difference at the verb in recordings of participants reading them aloud. Unfortunately, I did not find the results I initially hoped for, but there were enough unanswered questions at the end of it that it made me want to keep searching and has now led me to pursue a PhD and continue looking into this link between syntax and phonetics.

What was the most exciting or interesting part of doing your M.A.?

Defending my thesis in person was an unforgettable experience. Because of all the weirdness of the pandemic, I was the first student in two years to defend my thesis in person. The rush of presenting a project I had worked for two years on, combined with the relief of hearing from the committee that I had passed, is something that is going to stick with me for a long time.

What are your plans now that you have completed your M.A.?

I have begun pursuing a PhD in Linguistics at the University of Calgary. I am fortunate to still be a part of the experimental syntax lab here at SFU and I hope to keep doing so for as long as possible.

Do you have any advice or tips for undergrads who are thinking to go into an M.A. program or for graduate students who are currently in the program?

Enjoy the time that you have in the program. When you are in the middle of it, it can be really hard to see the forest for the trees. Having the benefit of hindsight now, I can say that I am really happy with everything that happened in my MA and while there will always be things that could have gone better, I can't picture myself doing anything else and I wouldn't change any of it. Just being able to recognize how lucky we are as academics to be able to pursue the things that we are passionate about is something that you should never take for granted.

JESSE WEIR'S MA THESIS

Imperative phonetic analysis:

Abstract:

Null subject imperatives are hypothesized to contain a null pronominal subject with second person ϕ -features (pro) (Potsdam, 1998). The two experiments in this thesis test whether this null element significantly impacts the phonetic stress assigned to the following word, as

compared to imperative sentences containing an overt you subject instead. The two types of imperative sentences were compared to raising sentences, which have previously been found to show no significant phonetic stress assignment changes regardless of the presence of an expletive it subject (Weir, 2019). It was hypothesized that a significant interaction between imperative and raising sentences would appear as an effect of subject presence. No significant interaction was observed in either experiment and thus, no phonetic impact of pro was found. Both experiments, however, showed a significant effect of clause type independent of subject presence, suggesting that participants were employing phonetic means to distinguish imperative and raising sentences when reading them.