

What is Comparative Linguistics?

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Comparative Linguistics is the study of human language as a species-specific phenomenon in all facets of its occurrences. Why are languages the way they are? How come there are both remarkable similarities and extreme differences in the languages of the world? How do languages change? Comparative Linguistics is chiefly interested in general patterns that shape each and every language, both in their current structure (synchrony) and in their historical developments (diachrony). In other words, Comparative Linguistics is a discipline that seeks to formulate general principles of language. As such it differs from language-specific programs like German Studies, Slavic Studies, etc. (in German: *Germanistik*, *Slawistik*, etc.), which seek to understand an individual language in itself. The kinds of principles that are studied in Comparative Linguistics cover the nature of the language faculty and the architecture of grammar, the evolution and history of language families and language areas, general patterns in the acquisition of languages by children and adults, and the relationship of languages with social and cultural structures on the one hand, and with patterns in cognition and the brain on the other hand.

However, the empirical foundation of Comparative Linguistics ultimately lies in individual languages and their histories. Therefore, a comparative linguist is typically also concerned with detailed research on individual languages. As the large languages of Europe and elsewhere (English, French, Chinese, etc.) are typically already covered by language-specific programs, comparative linguists usually study less well-known languages when they seek to expand their database. An important part of a comparative linguist's research activities therefore involves fieldwork on under-researched, and often endangered, languages world-wide and/or philological work on earlier stages of languages (in Zurich, typically Indo-European languages).

While linguistics is traditionally limited to the study of human languages, more recently (and especially at UZH), comparative linguists have also started to study the communication systems of other species, together with behavioral and evolutionary biologists.

An education in Comparative Linguistics includes the study of the key dimensions along which languages tend to be organized:

- phonetics (the study of speech production and perception)
- phonology (how sounds or gestures function together in differentiating words)
- morphology (the formation and composition of words)
- syntax (the formation and composition of sentences)
- semantics (the study of meaning)
- pragmatics (how context influences meaning)

Cross-cutting these dimensions are specialized (but often overlapping) sub-disciplines that examine linguistic structures from different perspectives:

- historical linguistics: individual languages and their relations over time
- linguistic typology: the distribution and evolution of structural types worldwide
- sociolinguistics: language from a social perspective
- anthropological linguistics: the relations between language, culture and evolution
- neuro- and psycholinguistics: language from cognitive and neurobiological perspectives
- computational linguistics: language as a computational problem
- corpus linguistics: patterns in discourse, typically using statistical methods
- philology: individual languages in historical texts

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What Comparative Linguistics is NOT:

- Like other linguists, a comparative linguist is not interested in teaching how to speak “correctly” or how to best express oneself. Linguists see language as an object of scientific study, not as something they wish to actively change and shape because of what they happen to like or not like.
- Comparative Linguistics is not merely the study of languages by people who love to learn as many languages as possible (although a strong interest in and passion for languages of course helps!). Comparative linguistics requires a comparative, generalist view. Each of the 7000 languages found on the planet is of equal interest to the comparative linguist, and comparative linguists aim to build databases with information on as many languages as possible.
- Comparative Linguistics is not limited to qualitative and interpretative methods but makes heavy use of statistics, logic and mathematics. *If you hated math in school, Comparative Linguistics may not be the right choice for you!* A love for languages or cultures, or a feeling of ‘I am good at languages’ alone is usually not enough for studying Comparative Linguistics.
- Comparative Linguistics is not the study of different literatures. Literary studies employ different methods and pursue different goals from linguistics. Literary work is included in philological work in linguistics, but the perspective is very different from the one taken in literary studies.
- Comparative Linguistics does not directly lead to a profession in language teaching or language pedagogics. While a deep understanding of how language works is certainly necessary for these careers, Comparative Linguistics is not an applied but a theoretical discipline.

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Comparative Linguistics at UZH:

The Department of Comparative Language Science at UZH is a research-oriented institute and teaching is tightly integrated with research. For more information, check out our module catalogue!

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Prospective students

Prospective students should seriously consider the nature of the department's foci on theory and on qualitative and, particularly, quantitative analyses in the scientific study of language. These foci presuppose a strong interest not only in languages per se, but also a strong commitment to the acquisition of a wide range of analytical and statistical methods and various computational and technical tools.

Students in the Department of Comparative Language Science at the University of Zurich attain basic knowledge in linguistics in the core dimensions of language, as listed above. In addition, the curriculum draws heavily on statistics, methods in data science (e.g. computer programming, data mining, regular expressions), experimental methods and methods for fieldwork and corpus development.

Students attend introductory classes on the core dimensions of linguistic structure, such as introductions to morphology or phonetics, which are followed by specialized courses in fields including psycholinguistics and anthropological linguistics.

As the texts to be read in the different courses are almost exclusively in English, good reading command of English is absolutely necessary for prospective students. The courses are typically taught in either German or English, which makes sufficient skills in understanding and communicating in both languages a prerequisite.

The program is challenging, but rewarding for those interested in academic careers in linguistics, including teaching at university level, language documentation, and other language-related research programs. Comparative Linguistics does not directly prepare the students for a career outside of academia, so prospective major students should be ready to embark on an academic career, with all its advantages and drawbacks.

If you are studying to become a language teacher, a broad background in the core areas of linguistics may be useful, but advanced studies in quantitative analysis may not be as beneficial for classroom instruction in second language teaching programs, etc. Those students may wish to take the minor.