

Language Science at the AAAS Family Science Days Festival

How much language science can a 5-year-old—or 50-year-old—learn in a noisy, crowded exposition hall with a stage show blaring two aisles over? Enough to spark their interest in linguistics and get them to notice the language around them in a new way, says Cecile McKee, University of Arizona linguistics professor and organizer of many science, book, and other fairs for the general public. The secret of a successful booth at a festival, she points out, is to be very visual and have hands-on activities.

The Linguistics for Everyone Committee followed McKee's formula for its 2-day appearance at Family Science Days (FSD) at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting February 2015 in San Jose CA. This year, 5,000 registrants from the general public, plus a large portion of the 9,000 regular attendees circulated through 50 booths and two days of stage shows. Among the attractions were opportunities to help dissect a giant squid, don a space suit, and see the night sky in an inflatable planetarium. According to the organizers, this was the first time language science was represented—certainly the first time there were language scientists in a banana suit.

The Linguistics for Everyone booth was busy from start to finish. Festival-goers did Stroop tasks on iPads, analyzed an ambiguous sentence featuring a banana (hence the banana suit). They did a mini-experiment that showed which hemisphere handles language. They got sound spectrographs of their names along with pointers on what they can see in them. There was a video screen with engaging clips on language themes, and puzzlers on orthography, morphology, phonology, and syntax lite to take home.

The Linguistics for Everyone committee presented symposia and demonstrations for fellow linguists at the Boston University Conference on Language Development in November 2014 and the Linguistic Society of America meeting in January, 2015. At FSD, the committee was no longer talking about the rewards of bringing linguistics to a broader audience; they were doing it, and hope to repeat their success next year at the AAAS meeting in Washington DC.

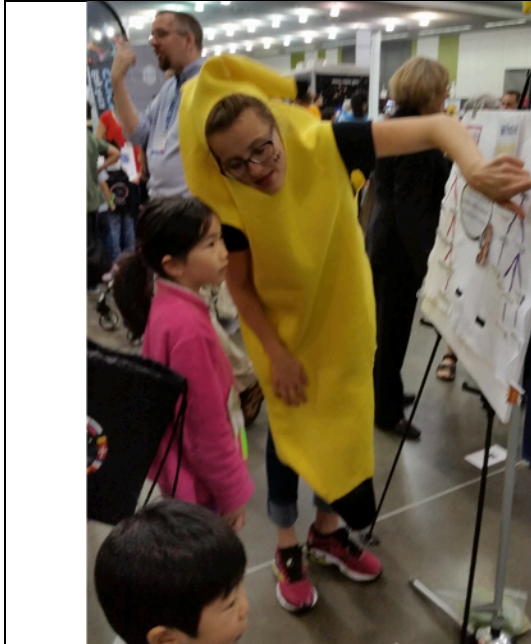
Festival volunteers came from [the](#) University of Arizona, (Cecile McKee, Elly Zimmer, Noah Nelson, Yamile Diaz, and Sean Harley), the Ohio State University (Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, Mike Phelan, Matt Webber, and Macy Uchino), and Stanford University (Masoud Jasbi and Erica Verde) with help and coordination from Brice Russ of LSA and Barbara Pearson from UMass-Amherst. Logistics were facilitated by Joan Maling of NSF and Colin Phillips of the University of Maryland. Student travel was supported through NSF grant BCS-1452266 to Colin Phillips, P.I.



Mike Phelan (OSU) makes IPA nametags, while Macy Uchino (OSU) shares a Stroop task



(above) Views of the booth from a distance (below) Rush Holt, CEO of AAAS, at the booth



Elly Zimmer (U AZ) and Masoud Jasbi (Stanford) work through an attachment ambiguity with visitors



Yamile Diaz (U AZ) times a visitor using the finger-tapper