

# Statement of Purpose

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After 10 years of English, 4 years majoring in Arabic, and 2 months of self-learning Cantonese, I discovered that my motivation for language learning is stemmed from a fascination with the unique linguistic features embedded in each language, and the sense of novel cognitive experience further fueled my interest. During my undergraduate exchange year, I encountered Chinese learners who prompted me to examine my own native language from a new perspective. This finally led me to pursue a master's degree in second language acquisition with a focus on Chinese, to explore language and cognition from a new standpoint.

Through my master's studies, I came to understand that grammaticality is not a binary matter but exists on a continuum of felicity. Often, sentences that are perfectly grammatical still feel infelicitous, and processing them involves more than parsing; it requires constructing contexts and reasoning about the speaker's intended meaning, what we do all the time in our native language. This realization *pinned down* my interest to the *interface* of semantics and pragmatics. Specifically, I am drawn to questions such as: (1) How do specific contexts shape our interpretation of a speech, and conversely, how do we choose what to say in different contexts? (2) How this nuanced interaction is acquired, given the limitations of explicit instruction and *poverty of the stimulus*? (3) To what extent can it be relearned by adults? In this light, second-language learners, as well as other bilinguals and monolinguals, children and adults, represent unique profiles to these dynamics.

My academic experiences can be grouped into research projects, skills, and scholarly communities. My research began with a focus on negation processing, a fundamental and pervasive phenomenon at the interface of semantics and pragmatics. Together with my supervisor, we conducted a series of experiments using sentence picture verification task to examine the semantic representation of negative yes/no questions in Mandarin and English — two languages with typological distinctions in yes/no questions, contributing to ongoing debates in formal semantics. Related works has been presented at several conferences including *the 7th Annual Meeting of the Psycholinguistics Society of China* (2024), and awarded Best Paper at *the 2nd Conference on Theory and Practice of Bilingualism* (2024). Publication is also in preparation during the application. This project exemplifies a learning-by-doing approach that builds my skills in each stage in conducting research. It has also instilled in me strong habits in academic reading, writing and communication.

Another learning-by-doing project was a corpus-based lexical semantic study that investigates trending homophones in Chinese social media. Utilizing available NLP tools, packages and a pre-trained BERT, I gathered data from one social media platform and applied semantic dependency parsing, collocation analysis, keyword analysis and the masking task to develop metrics for evaluating the syntactic and semantic properties of these internet-driven, dialect-derived lexical innovations within the framework of word borrowing. This work, initially part of a Corpus Linguistics course, has been submitted to *the 7th International Conference on Natural Language Processing (ICNLP 2025)*. My involvement in this project also led to serving as a reviewer for CLSW 2024 chaired by Professor Su, who taught the Corpus Linguistics course.

I was also invited by Professor Yan to her research group on child language acquisition, where I helped initiate, collect and transcribe natural dialogues of Mandarin-speaking children aged 3 to 7, contributing to the CHILDES database. This experience of interacting with children at various stages of language development and with different personalities sparked my interest in child language acquisition, a field I am eager to explore further.

Beyond projects, I actively engaged with academic communities, including Professor Feng's reading group. Every Friday we discuss selected papers and our own studies, which honed my ability in critical thinking and constructive feedback. I also shared my research and coding techniques with peers. It has been an honor to have these scholars as my recommenders, and I am grateful for their guidance.

And last, my training in Arabic and language teaching remain firm assets ready to integrate into future research.

I am drawn to the approaches that views language as a natural phenomenon best understood through interdisciplinary and experimental methods, and I value the chance to engage with the community that shares same curiosity for language science.

One reason I pursued a master's in second language acquisition was the broad range of possibilities it offered. Now, building on the anchor points I have developed, I am ready to explore future opportunities, trusting that new experiences will continue to shape my career path. Whether in academia or industry, I remain committed to advancing our understanding of language and its acquisition. With my experience, adaptability, enthusiasm and openness to new perspectives, I am confident in my ability to make meaningful contributions to the field of language science.