

Debate continues over American Sign Language

■ A linguistics professor urges the University to allow ASL to fulfill the bachelor of arts foreign language requirement

By Robin Weber
Oregon Daily Emerald

As the discussion continues of what constitutes a "foreign" language by University standards, the University undergraduate council is looking to language experts for ideas.

University of New Mexico linguistics professor Sherman Wilcox spoke to the undergraduate council on Monday, encouraging the University to make sign language an option for fulfilling the bachelor of arts degree foreign language re-

quirement. Following his presentation to the council, he addressed more than 50 people in the EMU Ben Linder Room about the history, benefits and culture of teaching American Sign Language.

"You don't have to go to another country to put language study to practice," Wilcox said.

He traced the roots of ASL back to the 17th century in Martha's Vineyard, where it was used as a communication mode among the large deaf population.

Wilcox explained how written sign language can aid in learning by developing books, educational tools and sign language dictionaries.

"One way we share experiences is through writing," he said.

Wilcox suggested ASL simply be given the same amount of recognition as other languages. "We should at least investigate the possibility of writing ASL," he said.

This issue is not new to the University. In 1994, the University undergraduate council voted down the concept of ASL being an acceptable language alternative. Since then, the ASUO Student Senate passed a resolution in March recognizing ASL as a foreign language, but the process has now shifted to the University undergraduate council for suggestions of what comes next.

Although the program has yet to be accepted as meeting the University's foreign language standards, the ASL Club is pushing to spread

the signed word across campus.

The club — with more than 80 people involved — meets every other week for a "Dine and Sign," where members eat dinner and sign with each other, often along with interpreters, teachers and other members of the deaf community.

"We want to promote deaf culture and ASL awareness and learn more signing," ASL club president Sunh Yanagishita said.

The club is currently working to save up funds on its own until it is eligible for ASUO funding, but participants are hoping to eventually bring a deaf culture night to the University, just as other cultures are celebrated. The group also seeks to have more formal

ASL practice sessions for anyone interested.

Yanagishita said the language is often misinterpreted.

"People think it's the same as English," she said, "but there is a deaf culture out there all to itself."

The undergraduate council will continue to hear reports from language departments about ASL and the foreign language requirement. Undergraduate council chairman John Nicols said he doesn't expect the council to reach a decision before May.

"The exploration has been productive, and I think we'll come to a decision that's useful," he said.

E-mail reporter Robin Weber
at robinweber@dailymerald.com.

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News brief

Study finds pesticide harms frogs' sexual development

The most popular weedkiller in the United States can disrupt the sexual development of frogs, even at extremely low levels such as those found in rainfall, University of California-Berkeley researchers reported Monday.

When frogs were raised in water tainted with atrazine, as many as one in five developed multiple ovaries or testes or became hermaphrodites, with male and female organs in the same animal, the team said.

The testosterone levels of male frogs plunged and their voice boxes shrank — important because it could impair their ability to call mates.

These effects showed up at levels 30 times lower than those considered safe by the Environmental Protection Agency, according to Tyrone B. Hayes of the University of California-Berkeley, who specializes in the study of hormones during development.

Researchers said the new study could help explain why the world's frogs are in a sharp and puzzling decline. Worldwide, 58 amphibian species have gone extinct over the past three decades or have not been seen in years. Another 91 are considered critically endangered and at risk of extinction.

"We really do see amphibians as biodiversity bellweathers," said biologist David Wake of the University of California-Berkeley, who was not involved in the current study. "They've been around for 300 million years. They're tough, and yet they're checking out all around us."

The new report, in Tuesday's issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, comes at a time when the EPA is reassessing the safety of atrazine. The weedkiller has been used for four decades in 80 countries and may be the most popular herbicide in the world; more than 60 million tons were applied last year in the United States, mostly to corn and sorghum crops.

The EPA now allows up to 3 parts per billion of atrazine in drinking water and is considering new standards that would allow wildlife to be exposed to up to 12 parts per billion. The Berkeley group found sexual development was affected at levels as low as .1 part per billion.

Jennifer Sass, a senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C., said she thought the Berkeley study would have "a huge impact" on the process of setting standards. "It's good work, scientifically sound work, repeatable work," she said. "The experiments were done under rigorous scientific conditions, and the effects are dramatic."

—(KRT)

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