Activities for Festivals
Syntactic Ambiguity Activity
This activity presents two different syntax trees for the ambiguous sentence *The man poked the monkey with a banana.*
Festival-goers match a picture corresponding to each interpretation to the appropriate structure.
Lateralization Activity
This activity encourages festival-goers to make a hypothesis about which side of the brain houses language. Festival-goers tap as many times as possible in 30 seconds with the right hand while speaking or silent.
We record data based on the participant’s hand-preference. Averages show that the group who remains silent taps faster on average, illustrating how language loads the left hemisphere.
Speech Analysis Activity
Festival-goers record their names in PRAAT, a free speech analysis software (see Resources for link).
We guide them through some details of their spectrogram and print out their personal waveform.
Spanish Stress Activity
Festival-goers are shown a Spanish phrase with two meanings depending on its stress pattern (*tacos de papá* ‘father’/ *pápa* ‘potato’). They match each version of the phrase with its picture.
We developed the Spanish stress activity, in part, because Tucson has a large population of Spanish speakers. We try to tailor our activities to our local community.
Phonetic Nametags
A volunteer goes into the crowd and transcribes festival-goers’ names into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This is a great way to draw festival-goers back to our table.
Audiovisual Materials
We use a computer and large monitor to show videos that illustrate certain features of language. Please see the section on resources for a list of videos that we use.
This photo shows two volunteers training before an event. We practice explaining the videos beforehand to make our deliveries clear and concise.
Handouts and Giveaways
We provide an assortment of handouts with resources about linguistics and linguistic puzzlers.
We also have giveaways that attract participants to our booth and remind them later of what they learned. These include temporary tattoos, candy, brain headbands, and zipper pulls.
More tips for doing linguistics at festivals
Our work has been guided by the strands of informal science learning framework from National Academies Press. At festivals, we focus on Strands 1 and 5.

(Bell, Lewenstein, Shouse, & Feder, 2009)
Challenges we’ve encountered

1. **Linguists:** Some linguists criticize our terminological choices.

   **Solution:** Our goal is to make linguistics accessible and interesting to the lay person. We reduce technical terminology to make our activities engaging to the general public.

2. **Rejection:** Some festival-goers are not interested in our activities.

   **Solution:** Don’t be offended when festival-goers are distracted or ask odd questions. Be attuned to the visitor’s response. If they lose interest, wrap-up quickly and let them leave happy.

3. **Time:** We usually only have a few minutes with each individual.

   **Solution:** We practice in advance to be concise. We give hand-outs and show websites to people who want more information.

4. **Logistics:** Early versions of some of our activities used large poster board. They took too much space and were impossible to fly with.

   **Solution:** All of our activities are now collapsible so they are easy to disassemble and reassemble on site.