At one time or another, many of us have found ourselves beginning to speak like the people around us, from the words we use to the way in which we pronounce them. Although the changes may be subtle, this phenomenon of alignment can actually lead to large-scale language change, as new linguistic variants spread from person to person through conscious or unconscious imitation.

My work this summer focused on the intersection of linguistic alignment and phonetic change, specifically an aspect of speech called voice onset time. This is a small part of a broader project that seeks to illuminate the cognitive profiles of the leaders of language change: what sorts of people are responsible for introducing and propagating innovative variants in their communities? Are those who are advanced in their adoption of new linguistic variants also advanced in their alignment behavior? This work builds on previously studied shifts in vowel pronunciation in white, working-class Philadelphians. Alignment is likely to be an essential part of the language change process, due to its ability to diffuse innovative variants throughout a given community.

Although I had previously worked in biological research, this project gave me insight into the process of research in the social sciences. Overall, it showed me that the two are remarkably similar in many ways; though linguistics is not a hard science, it makes no less use of the scientific method and quantitative data. This has allowed me to narrow my path going forward to the social sciences, specifically linguistics and psychology. Because my time was largely unstructured, it also taught me a great deal about managing my own schedule in a productive way. Going forward, I look forward to furthering my work on this project and continuing to explore these fields both inside and outside of the classroom.