Expectation lies within everyday conversations. When people converse, they expect that both sides want to understand and be understood—an assumption that allows them to communicate. In criminal interrogations, however, this reciprocal consideration is nonexistent. Ruth Hannah de Kleer, a Senior Linguistics major, is attempting to learn how criminal interrogations operate under linguistic rules. “The law does not actually correspond to how people actually communicate in real life,” de Kleer stated. “Criminal interrogations directly violate linguistic rules... you’re not on the same side, basically.”

The Rawlings Cornell Presidential Research Scholar made the decision to major in linguistics back in high school. Coming into Cornell, she spoke fluent Spanish and German, and just a touch of Cantones. “I just loved learning languages,” she says, and this love has spurred her towards studying linguistics and then into research. She first became interested in the topic of the integration of linguistics into law in the summer of 2010, when she heard about the Berguis vs. Thompkins case. In the case, Thompkins was interrogated for a shooting in Southfield, Michigan, and though he remained silent for most of his interrogation, he had not stated explicitly that he was invoking his Miranda right to silence. The omission ended up incriminating him when he answered a simple ‘yes’ when asked if he prayed for God to forgive him.

“That excited me because it was a brand new case, a brand new law, to interpret linguistically,” de Kleer says. It showed that unlike the assumptions that drive normal conversations, only explicit statements take true effect in law. While her current research is not directly involved, she says that this case is what started her thinking about the different areas in which law and language overlap and diverge. De Kleer conducts her research by first reading extensively on linguistic theories and transcripts of interrogations and cases available to the public, and then compares the theories to what actually transpired in the interrogation rooms and what the law dictates.

When asked how she might expand her research, she explained the inevitable shortage of data. “It’s really hard to get transcripts, but there are some available... What I theoretically would like to do would be to get a lot more interrogation [transcripts] and look at them, maybe do a statistical analysis.” Another difficulty is in finding time between completing a major and two minors, Law and Society and Music, and discipline. “It was very difficult because I had to have my own motivation to do it, make my research more routine, set hours [for] every day, every week,” de Kleer stated. Her research advisor Professor Molly Diesing from the Linguistics department suggests readings and the direction in which de Kleer could extend her research, which greatly aids her in focusing her work; but de Kleer is the main driving force in conducting and motivating the research.

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