n·a·c·l·o

USA and Canada Teams Win Six Medals at the 2017 International Linguistics Olympiad in Dublin, Ireland

Two USA teams and two Canadian teams, each consisting of four high school students, brought back huge success at the 15th International Linguistics Olympiad, held from July 31 to August 4 in Dublin, Ireland. The teams took home six medals and one Best Solution Award.

August 14, 2017
Hosted by Dublin City University (DCU)
July 31-August 4, Dublin, Ireland

On July 30, eight USA students and eight Canadian students traveled to Dublin City University in Dublin, Ireland. 176 students from 44 teams from 28 countries and territories participated in the 15th International Linguistics Olympiad (IOL). The two US teams and the Canada Anglophone team were selected by the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO), along with the Canada Francophone team, who qualified through

Olympiade Linguistique Canadienne-Canadian Linguistics Olympiad (OLC-CLO) on the contest field.

The IOL is one of twelve International Science Olympiads for secondary school students. The contest consists of two events: the individual and the team contest. The individual contest is a six-hour exam with five problems. This year, the individual round featured the following languages: Birom, Abui, Kimbundu, Laven in Khom script, and Madak. In the team contest, team members collaborate to solve one particularly challenging problem. This year, teams were tasked with matching 87 emoji symbols with their Indonesian descriptions within three hours. Problem solving at the IOL stresses the ability of contestants to decipher the mechanisms of languages by using logic and reasoning to explore a wide range of hypotheses.

The US team took home six medals. Brian Xiao of USA Red won a gold medal. Silver medals went to Andrew Tockman of USA Red, Joseph Feffer of USA Blue, and Ziyan "Heidi" Lei of USA Red. Finally, Siye "Annie" Zhu of USA Red and Sonia Reilly of USA Blue were awarded bronze medals. Brian Xiao was awarded the Best Solution award for his answer to problem 3.

In addition to the competition, the IOL this year introduced the team members to the Irish culture. Students and coaches sat at lectures on Gaelic grammar and went on excursions to visit 5000-year-old Celtic passage tombs as well as medieval castles and Christian stone crosses. When reflecting on this year's IOL, the team members treasured the opportunity to bond over their shared passion for linguistics as the most memorable part of their experience. Joseph Feffer of USA Blue said, "While the competition was fun and the Irish scenery was amazing, the people I met and interacted with made the IOL a truly amazing experience." Heidi Lei of USA Red added, "It was a precious opportunity to meet linguistically inclined kids worldwide." Vanessa Hu of USA Blue concurred, "I am glad I could meet talented people from all over the world who are passionate about language and linguistics." Indeed, the social aspect is considered the favorite component of the event. Andrew Tockman of USA Red said, "Not only were the problems themselves at IOL challenging and interesting, it was also a great opportunity to meet amazing people with similar interests from all over the world who I'll continue to be friends with long after the closing ceremony." Indeed, Antonin Benoît of Canada Francophone reflected, "It's the first time I've made friendships this strong in such a short timespan." Jane Li of Canada Anglophone commented, "We really had fun, especially with the new francophone Canadian team. I love IOL *hati-hati* (Indonesian for plural ❤)!" Georges Awaad of Canada Francophone concluded, "IOL was one of the most refreshing, enlightening, enriching, and unforgettable experiences of my life. I have met so

many wonderful people and made friendships that are here to last. I highly recommend the IOL to anyone who's interested in linguistics, languages, and/or problem solving in general."

The two USA teams and the Canada Anglophone team were selected through the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO). This annual competition, held since 2007, has two rounds, which are held at universities and high schools throughout the USA and Canada. This year over 1,700 students took the open round, a three-hour test. Approximately the top 10% of the students from the open round were invited to the next round, a more difficult, four-hour test. The joint US-Canadian practices were conducted online and in person by the USA coaches Dragomir Radev of Yale University, Lori Levin of Carnegie Mellon University, and Aleka Blackwell of Middle Tennessee State University, the Canadian coaches Heather Newell of Université du Québec à Montréal and Daniel Lovsted of McGill University, as well as other coaches Pat Littell of Carnegie Mellon University, Tom McCoy of Yale University, and Adam Hesterberg of MIT.

Before traveling to IOL, some of the team members spent two days training at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They attended presentations by James Pustejovsky of Brandeis University (computational linguistics), Dragomir Radev (neural nets), Kai Von Fintel of MIT (semantics), and Lori Levin (syntax), in addition to tutorials on phonetics (Edward Flemming, MIT), metrical structure and poetry (Donca Steriade, MIT), morphology (Aleka Blackwell), and morphosyntactic alignment (Lori Levin).

Other members of the organizing committee include James Pustejovsky of Brandeis University and Andrew Lamont of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The teams' sponsors include the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics (NAACL), the US National Science Foundation (NSF), Yahoo!, Brandeis University, Carnegie Mellon University, Yale University, and individual donors.

The next IOL will be held in Prague, Czech Republic on July 25-31, 2018.

More Information

NACLO - http://www.nacloweb.org/ - contains practice problems, contest rules, and registration details for NACLO's competitions.
IOL - http://www.ioling.org/ - contains a record of all past IOL problems and results

Contact Information

Aleka Blackwell - Aleka.Blackwell@mtsu.edu

Lori Levin - lsl@cs.cmu.edu

Heather Newell - newell.heather.uqam@gmail.com

Dragomir Radev - dragomir.radev@yale.edu