

BRANDEIS STORIES

Jin Zhao, MS'20, PhD'26: The words we choose, the world we see



Jin Zhao, MS'20, PhD'26

Photo Credit: Gaelen Morse

By Eliza Boetsch

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For Jin Zhao, MS'20, PhD'26, the most important question in artificial intelligence (AI) right now isn't what these systems can do. It's how they should be used.

That's the driving force behind Zhao's research into how AI systems process and present language — and whether the tools we're building are making us more informed or simply reinforcing what we already think.

Zhao, a doctoral candidate in [computer science](#), will deliver the graduate student address at Brandeis University's 75th [Commencement](#) exercises on May 17. She was nominated by a fellow student who recognized her work as a model for how AI can be used for good.

"He told me he felt my work had real social impact, and that it was important for people to see how AI can be used to address meaningful, real-world problems," Zhao said.

Consider two news articles describing the same corporate decision. One calls it "streamlining operations" and another calls it "mass layoffs." The facts are identical, but the framing changes how readers understand who is affected and why it matters. Zhao's work develops AI systems that can detect those differences in framing — helping surface how language shapes the story being told.

"If we don't understand how language shapes perception, we risk amplifying those biases at scale," she said. "My goal is not to tell people what to believe, but to help them see how beliefs are shaped."

Zhao initially came to Brandeis to pursue a master's degree in [computational linguistics](#).

"When I started my master's, I focused on building computational tools and technical skills," Zhao said. "But over time, I realized what I really care about is using those tools to tackle real-world problems that have genuine social impact. That's what made me stay for the PhD."

It's a trajectory many graduate students can relate to: arriving with one set of questions and leaving with deeper ones.

Zhao credits much of that growth to the people around her. Her advisor, Professor of Computer Science and Linguistics [Nianwen Xue](#), gave her both rigorous guidance and room to develop as a researcher. She also credits a broader community of mentors, noting that faculty including Professors [James Pustejovsky](#), [Constantine Lignos](#), [Lotus Goldberg](#) and many others helped foster an environment that was both intellectually serious and genuinely collaborative. Executive Director of English Language Programs

Vinodini Murugesan mentored her in public speaking and, Zhao said, in something harder to define.

“She has a way of seeing potential in people before they fully see it themselves,” Zhao said. “She helped me find my voice — in how I present my ideas and myself more broadly. It has meant a great deal to me.”

In her Commencement remarks, Zhao hopes to leave graduates with a sense of responsibility for the tools they build and the words they choose.

“I hope people take away the importance of listening with curiosity and humility,” she said. “Not just asking whether something is true, but also asking how it shapes our perception of others.”

After graduation, Zhao will join the Computer Science Department at Saint Louis University as a tenure-track assistant professor, continuing her work in natural language processing and applied AI.

“Brandeis taught me to think carefully about how language reflects and shapes human perspectives,” she said. “That has shaped not only my research, but how I want to teach and mentor students going forward.”

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