The Final Paper

Overview

Broadly speaking, your final paper should be a research paper or essay. This basically does what it says on the tin: it requires you to do research on a particular topic and present the main themes or ideas and any competition or controversies between them. Identifying competing or alternative explanations isn’t as difficult as it sounds: being the hotly-contested discipline that it is, linguistics is full of bitter arguments and furious debate about phenomenon x or theory y. These are often long-standing and unresolved arguments, and they are almost always adequately presented and discussed in an accessible way in most introductory texts.

You are expected to evaluate these ideas and use your own judgment and insight to analyse and discuss them in your own words. Don’t just paraphrase what Language Files says about a certain subject (or, worse, a webpage, though more on that later). Include your own thoughts and opinions – and your questions – and critically respond to what you read. Remember, I can read whatever you have read much faster than you can paraphrase it. Tell me what you think about it.

You’re not expected, however, to once-and-for-all arbitrate on the truth or falsehood of these competing claims or decide which one is absolutely-the-correct-answer-that-all-linguists-will-henceforth-agree-on. That said, it’s entirely possible that your own ideas may be the one new way of looking at a problem which will take the whole discipline forward.

What is most important, here, is that you do plenty of reading and research on a topic that you have found interesting in linguistics so far, that you present the state-of-the-art current positions on it (or present a more historical analysis of the development of these ideas), and that you demonstrate that you have really given these issues some serious thought, and written eloquently and carefully about them. And, crucially, note that the topic should be one that you have found interesting in linguistics. If the thought of drawing X-bar syntax trees in Athabaskan fills you with dread, then writing about it will be a painful experience. It will be equally painful to read, and none of us wants that.

Most of all, you should (try to) enjoy this research project – it should be a learning experience where you apply what you have got out of the course and develop it in your own direction.

Length

Your paper should be about 1500 words (+/- 10%). With 1.5 line spacing, in 12 point font, this should be (approximately) 6 pages or so long.

Grading

Your attendance and participation remains at 20%. The mid-term remains at 20%, and the final exam will now be 20%. This research paper will therefore be worth 40%.
Date of Submission

Your paper will be due on Friday April 30, 2010, which is the last day of the last teaching week of the Spring semester. If there are good reasons why this date needs to be negotiated, you must let me know ahead of time. Late penalties will apply, and it is important that you recognise that the final grade for the class must be submitted according to the Duke University calendar, or you risk sanction.

Consultation Hours

I’m happy – indeed, I encourage you – to meet to discuss any aspect of the paper, to look at drafts or essay plans, and to suggest readings. My office hours are reasonably flexible: I can also be contacted with specific questions, or sent drafts, via email.

Possible Topics

This is just a set of ideas to get the ball rolling: it is not intended to be exhaustive, so feel free to modify these ideas or even propose a completely novel area of research. Make sure you discuss it and agree it with me first, however: not because your ideas are not interesting, but so that you can choose something realistic and feasible. These ideas are potentially fruitful not because we have (necessarily) discussed them directly in class, but because you should – by now – be confident enough to use the relevant linguistic terminology, and have a competent grasp of the major concepts, in order to go out exploring on your own.

- What do we know about animal language?
- What kind of phonetic/phonological research has been done on different accents (pronunciation) or the elicitation of careful/natural speech data?
- How did Modern English lose much of the morphology evident in earlier forms of English (e.g. Old English)?
- Some languages – such as Klingon or Esperanto – have been invented. What areas of phonetics/phonology/morphology/syntax would need to be paid attention to in order to invent these (or your own) languages?
- Why do some linguists think that phonology + morphology / morphology + syntax / semantics + syntax are not discrete areas of study but overlap and have multiple ‘interfaces’?
- What are some of the ethical issues around researching language and the brain, and how have these changed over time?
- What do we know about aphasia or other aspects of language and the brain?
- How do children acquire language?
- What can language tell us about social interaction?
How to do (and how not to do) research

Wickedpedia. The internet, in all kinds of weird and wired and wonderful ways, has revolutionised forms of knowledge and communication, not least through Wickedpedia. As a democratisation of knowledge, Wickedpedia allows anyone to write anything about anything. Which is precisely why you should treat it with extreme caution. Wickedpedia is full of red herrings and falsehoods. All it takes is for some joker to decide to change the page on Mandarin Chinese to read that “it is spoken by umpteen bazillion people on one small island off the coast of Scotland” (and for you to uncritically copy this misinformation down) to make your paper worthless.

If the idea that any old Joe Schmo (or Josephine Schmo) can write malicious, misleading nonsense (and you faithfully reproduce it in your work) doesn’t put you off, then consider this: even your professors can write a load of baseless twaddle on Wickedpedia. So, were I to write a page on, say, the language of Obmuj-Obmum¹, and you were to faithfully paraphrase it and turn it in as an essay, I would know that a) you had only looked on Wickedpedia for your research, despite my exhortations to the contrary and b) were your words to be extremely similar to mine, that you had blatantly plagiarised me (see Referencing and Plagiarism, below). Neither of these are a good look.

Interweb. These caveats notwithstanding, the webnet can be a highly useful resource. Even Wickedpedia can be an excellent starting point for further research. However, you need to be sure that stuff on the interwebnet is a) from a valid source, such as a University or research institute and that b) anything you find on the interweb can be verified in books and journal articles (see below). The most well-written Wickedpedia pages point to other, more ‘scientific’ sources which you can not only use to check you are not uncritically regurgitating balderdash, but also use to read more widely and deeply about your chosen topic, and – gasp! – learn stuff about it. The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (there is an acronym, but it’s probably best not pronounced) is available online as an electronic resource, as are most scholarly journals – these have been peer-reviewed by experts in the field who, in theory, should know a little about what they’re talking about. Certainly, not everything put on the Information Highway is utterly worthless: but be very judicious in your selections, and take nothing at face value.

Follow that Reference. In the course of your research, you will come across mysterious artefacts which say things like (Bloggs, 1997:4).² This refers to page 4 of the article/book/thesis/interpretive dance on Txapakúran morpho-syntax done by someone surnamed Bloggs in 1997, more details of which are given in the bibliography. It’s probably worth going and finding Bloggs’ work and reading that (or at least some of it) and probably worth reading other articles/books/treatises which look

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¹ A common language of the Thhslub family, usually used among University students who write essays that only reference Wickedpedia.
² In other disciplines, such as history, the reference to Bloggs 1997:4 goes in a footnote. Linguistics (like sociology) uses a slightly different system.
relevant from the same bibliography in which you’ve found Bloggs.\(^3\) It’s also worth looking in Bloggs’ bibliography to see what he/she read, and reading those, and reading their bibliographies and so on and so forth. This is a paper chase, and it is surprising how often you can find something unique, interesting and compelling to say simply by going along with this treasure hunt. This should be the most enjoyable part of research: hunting snippets and clues and piecing together the great jigsaw puzzle that is your final product.

**The Library.** The library is the large building on West Campus that contains *books*. Lots and lots and lots of books. And journals, and PhD dissertations, and pictures and audio tapes and all manner of things like this. Its vast size – and the fact that it contains an awful lot of books – can be daunting for students. Which is why the library’s motto is ‘Save Time: Ask a Librarian’. Please, please do take these wonderful people up on their offer. One person you should befriend is the very knowledgeable Linguistics Librarian Linda Daniel ([linda.daniel@duke.edu](mailto:linda.daniel@duke.edu)) who can help you quickly navigate to the resources you most need to do the best linguistics research. Linda offers assistance and training in how to get the most out of the library, including finding books *and* accessing (and searching) worthwhile electronic resources. Obviously, it’s most courteous to her if you can arrange to meet her in small groups.

If the idea of sifting around in a fusty library full of old books doesn’t appeal, consider this: Julia Gaffield – a Duke graduate student – recently discovered what is thought to be the *only surviving manuscript copy* of the Haitian Declaration of Independence.


Now, who would you give an A+ grade/job to? Julia Gaffield, or someone who writes in their essay that ‘Egypt is the capital of Minnesota’ or that ‘hippopotamuses sleep on three legs’ because that’s what Wickedpedia told them?

**Referencing and Plagiarism.** Worse than wantonly referencing the internet is dis-referencing: a) not referencing at all, b) citing things in your text which you don’t then reference in your bibliography, c) referencing things in your bibliography which you haven’t actually cited in your text and d) referencing things you haven’t read.

Basically, unless it’s your *original* idea, then you need to cite where you read about it or heard about it. Obviously, if you pursued this maxim to its logically absurd conclusion, you’d have to reference every single word you wrote, so take this advice with a pinch of salt. But if you’re presenting someone else’s theory about syntax (and, being a Linguistics 101 student, you presumably haven’t thought of it yourself), or someone else’s data on the language of some remote Amazonian tribe (which, having been in Linguistics 101 class all semester, you presumably haven’t gone and gathered data on yourself), then give them the credit.

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\(^3\) If Bloggs’ work has something to say that you can’t fit into the text, say it here. Also use this space to put any of *your own* additional comments which don’t quite fit with the flow of the text. But use this space sparingly.
There are two reasons for this, apart from common courtesy. First – and most obviously – it avoids anyone accusing you of intellectual dishonesty (and violating the Duke Honor Code). Cheating is cheating, whether you copy from Chomsky himself or Charlie in your dorm. Second, and less obviously, your reader actually may find your work very interesting, and want to read more about it. Telling your reader where you found your information helps them immensely.

For linguistics papers – unless your instructor prefers otherwise⁴ – all references should be in the text, in parentheses, and follow the format (author surname, year of publication) for example (Bloggs, 1997). For broader ideas – like the main thesis of Bloggs’ book – the year is sufficient. For specific points (or for direct quotes) you should also include the page number (Bloggs, 1997: 4). For two authors, use both surnames (Bloggs & Widget, 1995) and for more than two authors, the first author and et al (Snodgrass et al, 2008). References to a related idea in the same parentheses which cite multiple papers from different authors should be separated with a semi-colon (Wangon, 1994; Didgit and Banari, 1967). Authors’ surnames can sometimes sit outside the parentheses containing the date where relevant, especially when, for example, Sodoff (1992) happens to be the subject of the verb. Where a citation is found in someone else’s work, this should be noted (Billit, 1967: 4, cited in Payit, 1968: 8). Where more than one work is attributed to the same author in the same year, use a, b, c, etc. to distinguish them (Flummox 2009a, 2009b).

So, it might look a little bit like this:

Intriguing work has been done on the syntax of kangaroos (Widget & Snodgrass, 1991) and koalas (Pibble, 1992; Clackers & Bangers, 1993). Some studies have claimed that koalas, in particular, have a strong grasp of syntactic structures, and that koalas adeptly use syntactically complex sentences to construct competitive mating calls (Bingo, 1995a; Clodhead, 1999), as well as alert other koalas to the presence of nearby food sources (Bingo, 1995b) or sleeping-places (Bingo, 1995c; Tryon & Bye, 1994: 48; Slingit & Weep, 2000).

However, much of this work has been criticised as “intellectually sterile and rather more concerned with the relative fluffiness of marsupials” than language (Rollocks & Humpbottom, 2001: 63). Whacking (1998: 2) strenuously denies the existence of any grammatical capabilities in these animals; the notion that koalas are more interested in drawing trees than eating or climbing them has been described elsewhere as “pure linguistic fiction” (Bashem & Scarper, 1996: 89, cited in Chase & Catch, 1997: 267).

⁴ And these really are individual preferences; you may be told otherwise (and so stick with that) but whatever format you use, keep it consistent.
Bibliography

In your bibliography (or ‘Works Cited’) you should then give the full citation of each and every work you cite and only the works you cite. Standard formats are below (note the use of italics). You can use 9, 10 or 11 pt. fonts here, and single-spacing, especially if it makes the bibliography fit neatly on your page.

Name, Initial. Date. *Title of book*. Place of publication: Publisher (for books)

Name, Initial. Date. ‘Title of Chapter’. In [Editor’s] Name, Initial. Ed. *Title of book*. Place of publication: Publisher (for chapters in books which are edited collections)

Name, Initial. Date. ‘Article title’ *Journal Title*. Volume #: Issue #, pps #–# (for journal articles)

Name, Initial. Day/Month/Year of publication. ‘Article Title’. *Newspaper or Magazine Title*. (for newspaper or magazine articles – use the newspaper/magazine title as the name if no author surname is attributed)


Name, Initial. Date. *Personal communication*. (for ideas you have spoken about with, for example, other students or your professors: reference as (name, p.c.) in the text.

For internet sites, the appropriate citation is the <full web address>, and the date accessed:


For newspaper/magazine articles accessed online, you should use the standard newspaper citation and, in the same citation, the internet citation (as above).