2 The Field of Linguistics

This chapter provides a bit of background on the field of linguistics, from types of writing that linguists do to ways of learning about the field. Getting connected and getting a sense of your place in the field (both you personally and your work) are very important. This will help you to start feeling like you're a linguist, rather than a linguistics student.

Types of Writing That Linguists Do

This section follows a rough progression from the kinds of things you'll have to write in graduate school to things that generally only professors write, although naturally this will vary with the individual. One general piece of advice: if you're about to embark on a new type of writing (say, your first conference abstract), it's always a good idea to ask someone to show you a successful example of that kind of writing. Ask your advisor, and ask your peers. Sometimes the more advanced graduate students will be kind enough to show you some of their work. I find it always helps to have a model.

Term Paper, Seminar Paper, Critical Review

Everybody knows what a term paper is, but making the transition from an undergraduate term paper to a graduate-level term paper or seminar paper takes some work. At the graduate level, papers are not only usually longer, but they also almost always involve some original research instead of just a summary of work that others have done. In addition, a graduate term paper has to take all (or most) of the relevant literature on the topic into account, something undergraduates aren't held to quite as strictly.

Some professors also assign critical reviews in their classes. In this type of writing the student is expected, first, to provide a summary of the arguments found in a given paper. This is not to be confused with a play-by-play rehash of everything in the article—it's intended to be a synthesis. The second component to a critical review is a critique of the arguments found in the paper. It's important here not to confuse the disparaging sense of "critical" with the intended evaluative sense. While there may be legitimate criticisms of the author's arguments, what is expected here is a balanced evaluation of those arguments.

MA Thesis

Some programs require an MA thesis, which is like a graduate term paper, but longer. You should ask your advisor or other people in your program very specific questions about what is expected. See if you can find copies of MA theses by previous students in your program, to give you an idea of what the norms are.

Prelim or Qualifying Paper

Most programs require one or more prelim or qualifying papers (so called because they are preliminary to the dissertation or qualify you for the dissertation). Depending on your program, these may be part of a larger examination process before you move on to your dissertation, and/or may be part of earning an en-route MA. Again, you should ask your advisor and others what is expected. Prelim papers are usually like term papers, but a bit more developed. (In fact, in my experience, they almost always start out as term papers.) You should find out what the standards are in your program: is it supposed to be of publishable quality? (What exactly does this mean? Who makes the judgment?) Are you expected to actually submit it somewhere? (Some programs make this a requirement.) What kind of length is expected? (Yes, quality is more important than quantity, but if there are expectations about length, you'd better be forewarned.) Prelim papers also often grow into dissertation topics, and sometimes can be used in revised form as a chapter of the dissertation.

Dissertation Proposal or Prospectus

The dissertation proposal or prospectus is a statement of what you plan to do in your dissertation. Expectations vary widely, so as always, find out in advance what your advisor recommends. Even the required length can vary—I was surprised to hear from a friend at another university that they suggest 25 pages for the prospectus, when I generally tell my students that they should write about ten. Then I recently discovered that one of my own colleagues was telling her students that they only needed to write two. See chapter 8 for more about dissertation proposals.

Grant Proposal

A grant proposal is a bit like a dissertation proposal, in that it usually describes proposed research. Grant writing is discussed in chapter 7.

Dissertation

Dissertations are book-length works in our field. A mathematician might be able to get away with a three-page dissertation, but you can't. Go to the library or

check on the web to see examples of dissertations that students in your department have produced (often a department will have its own library of dissertations somewhere too)—this will give you an idea of what previous graduate students in your program have done. I talk more about dissertations in chapter 8.

Review of Literature

A literature review can take many forms. Minimally, it must summarize the most important literature that has appeared on your topic. This can either be done in a section of a paper devoted to previous work on the topic, or piecemeal, as relevant. A more formal review of literature often appears as a chapter of the dissertation (commonly, it's chapter 2). In this case, the chapter consists of a summary, synthesis, and critique of the major works in the relevant area, often organized by claim or theoretical approach.[6]

Conference Abstract

Most conferences in linguistics make their decisions about what papers to accept based on the submission of short abstracts, rather than full papers. Most are quite specific about the precise length—one page or 500 words is common, often with a second page allowed for examples and/or references. See chapter 6 for advice on writing abstracts.

Conference Paper

A conference paper is delivered orally, and the length is determined by the time allotted (15 or 20 minutes is typical). In chapter 6 you will find a discussion of the differences between term papers and conference papers, and what you need to think about when you're reading a paper in front of an audience.

Book Review

There are at least three gradations of these: (a) a *book note* or *book notice* is a short summary of a book, usually one to two paragraphs; (b) a *book review* is longer (maybe two to four pages), and evaluates the book as well as summarizes it; and (c) a *review article* is an article-length evaluation of a book (or a series of books, or articles) which generally brings other literature and approaches to bear on the topic. Graduate students usually only write the first two types. Book reviews are discussed at the end of chapter 7.

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6. Rittner and Trudeau (1997:116–117) bluntly point out that "the purpose of the review of literature is to examine and integrate relevant and salient literature into some kind of a coherent whole. It is not a series of book reports or article summaries."

Squib

A squib is a short paper (anywhere from one to maybe ten pages), usually tackling a very specific problem. Often a squib addresses a problem brought up in another article, and then provides an alternative analysis of that problem or brings new data to bear on it. Only a few journals publish squibs (*Linguistic Inquiry* being the prominent example), but some professors assign them as course work.

Journal Article

Journal articles can grow out of a term paper, a prelim paper, or a conference paper. They need to be polished and professional, and are (at least part of) what will get you an academic job—and later, tenure and promotion.

Monograph or Book

Monographs and books are longer than articles and either broader or deeper in scope. As a graduate student, you don't need to worry about writing these—the dissertation is enough of a challenge for most of us in the graduate school stage.

Collaborative Research

There are many benefits to working together, one of the major ones being that each author learns and gains insight from the other. Linguistics is not, in my experience, a field where ideas and results are jealously guarded secrets; in fact, brainstorming is usually encouraged.

Graduate students sometimes collaborate with their peers, and sometimes with a professor. There are even more concrete benefits to be had from doing the latter—you learn directly from an experienced writer about doing research, argumentation, writing, and the publication process.

One potentially problematic issue that can arise in collaborative research is the order in which the authors are listed on the paper. Happily, there is a conventional way around this: the authors are listed in alphabetical order, and then the first footnote says something along the lines of: "The authors' names are listed in alphabetical order, but both contributed equally to the writing of this paper."

Finally, you should be aware that there are different norms in the subfields of linguistics about the appropriateness or frequency of coauthorship. For example, it is highly common in phonetics, but less so in semantics. Ask your advisor about the norms in your area and (as always!) follow his or her advice on this matter.

Prescriptivism and the Linguist

One of the first principles you learn in introductory linguistics classes is "always descriptive, never prescriptive," meaning that we linguists are interested in describing (and analyzing and explaining) language data, rather than prescribing a "right" way to talk. Students are therefore often baffled to find me wielding a wicked red (or pink or purple) pen on their papers. How can I justify criticizing their writing when I've sworn a solemn oath never to be prescriptive?

The answer is (as it so often is) that things aren't black and white. In this case the answer lies in the difference between spoken and written language. Written language is a very different kind of construct than spoken language is, and the slogan above really only applies to the latter.[7] Writing *can* be revised, so why not revise it? Writing lasts, so why not make it as effective, concise, direct, and even aesthetically pleasing as possible?

I hasten to add that I'm not an extreme prescriptivist when it comes to writing. I sometimes use "whom" when I write (never when I speak), but frankly, I couldn't care less about most of the silly rules we're supposed to adhere to (like not ending sentences with prepositions). What I do care about is clarity. Linguistics is a field that values clarity of expression in writing: a direct statement of one's argument, and straightforward language. As the bumper sticker says, eschew obfuscation.

Charles Hockett on Clarity

> Clarity is no virtue: it is the most elementary of scholarly duties. Obfuscation, on the other hand, is a sin. (Hockett 1966:73)

Learning about the Field

There are all sorts of ways in which you can learn about aspects of your chosen field in addition to the many fine books about linguistics. Websites contain vast amounts of useful information and advice. Email-based discussion lists allow you to read and participate in discussions on any area of linguistics. Professional organizations host meetings, publish journals and newsletters, and provide job announcements and other useful information. You can learn about current research and meet other linguists at conferences. And don't forget that your fellow graduate students and professors are also valuable resources. In this section I discuss some of these ways of learning about the field.

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7. This is admittedly an oversimplification, in that adherence to prescriptive rules comes into play in the spoken language as well (even for linguists). We all control a wide variety of registers (types of speech used in different situations), and more formal registers may involve the use of more prescriptive rules than others. For one interesting perspective on this topic see Cameron (1995).