Department of Spanish Studies, General Linguistics and Literature Theory  
University of Alicante

LINGUISTICS 8806
Facilitator: Irma M Muñoz Baell

Research Paper Guide

Academic year: 2009-2010

DEADLINE: WEDNESDAY, MAY 12, 2010
LATE ASSIGNMENTS ARE NOT GRADED!!

As noted in the Syllabus, one of the projects for the course is a research paper. The main purpose of a research paper is to allow an instructor to find out whether the student understands the course material well enough to see the relationship among the data and to create some synthesis in his or her own mind, rather than to just regurgitate a more or less random collection of ideas. **Remember that research papers are worth 10%**. Research papers should be **around 1,500 words** and must be **word-processed** and **double-spaced** (papers that do not adhere to these guidelines will be returned unread and a grade of 0% will be awarded).

In preparing your research paper, you must first choose one of the unresolved issues in linguistics from the list below. Unresolved issues in linguistics should be treated with two sides. Each side should have prominent supporting arguments and data.

At the beginning of the course, we mentioned that some of the most important unresolved issues in linguistics (downloadable from [http://www.ttt.org/linglinks/unresolved.html](http://www.ttt.org/linglinks/unresolved.html)) are as follows:

**General:**
- What is Linguistics?
- Is linguistics a science?
- Is there a fundamental difference between natural and formal languages?
- What is the relationship between human language and animal communication?
- Is natural language the sum of multiple, well defined domains, or is it more?

**Phonetics, Phonology, and Morphology:**
- What makes the vocal cords do all the things that they do?

**Syntax and Semantics:**
- Who decides if a sentence is grammatical or not?
- Is it possible to create a Universal Grammar that will apply across all languages?
- What is meaning really?

**Historical and Comparative Linguistics**
- Did all languages descend from one common ancestor language (monogenesis), from a few ancestor languages (oligogenesis), or from a large number of ancestor languages (polygenesis)?
- Is it possible to define the difference between languages, dialects, and ideoes? What is the possible impact of political influences on the distinction?
Language Acquisition:
- Child vs. Adult language acquisition: What are the similarities and differences between the two?
- What is the role of grammar in language learning?
- Where are grammatical principles and/or innate rules written in the neurons?

Languages and Computers:
- How can we recognize, analyze, and synthesize speech electronically?

What is a research paper?
A research paper is a piece of academic writing. Hence, it has some definite requirements to be completed. If these requirements are not completed, the writing cannot be called a research paper. Some of these requirements are:
  a) research papers need to have a precise and clear topic, which is related with some academic science. Still, it does not mean that the student’s research cannot exceed the bounds of the academic study. On the contrary, you are encouraged to contribute into the science development by your own research paper.
  b) research papers have to be structured according to the academic requirements. It means that:
     - the first part of your research paper has to introduce the readers into the topic of the paper and present the research’s background.
     - the second part of the paper should explain the methods of research and describe the research process. It is also necessary to mention all the additional sources which were used as the research’s background.
     - the last part should sum up and conclude the research.

How to write an effective research paper?
The first thing to do is to relax and stay calm. To be able to write a research paper, you have to plan your work, but not panic. You do not want to be in a hurry and write your research paper the last day before the deadline. **DO NOT LEAVE your research paper writing for later.**

Choose the most interesting topic for your research paper. Successfully chosen topic is 60% of your success.

Use your creativity. Do not say that you cannot. Every person can and you are not an exception. So, be creative, write an extraordinary research paper and surprise everybody.

What should I do first?
In your research paper, you will be asked to explore in depth a subject from the course material that interests you. You should combine your own thoughtful analysis of the topic with information from your sources. **Keep in mind, however, that this is to be an analytical paper, not simply a summary of your reading.**

After you have chosen your unresolved issue, begin doing some preliminary reading for your paper **(two thirds of your references must be from the University of Alicante’s libraries!)** before the Holy Week holiday. During the second week after the holiday, you will have to submit to me a one-page proposal for your research topic. The proposal will consist of an outline of your research paper and should give me some idea of how you intend to research and develop your arguments. **If you fail to do it, you will not be allowed to submit your final research paper.** This proposal is not graded, but it **must be approved** by me so that you can submit your final research paper. So you should approach it seriously; it can greatly enhance your chances for writing a successful research paper.
How should I structure my proposal for a research paper?

Please remember that proposals consist of an outline of your research paper and should give me some idea of how you intend to research and develop your arguments. Therefore, they must include:

1. Name of subject, group number, and assignment title.
2. Student name, and student id no.
3. Chosen topic (unresolved linguistic question) and main reasons for choosing this particular topic.
4. Research done (list of books and other material found, and final list of texts to be used to develop your arguments).
5. Brief explanation of different answers to the topic (at least two answers).
6. Outline of final conclusion.

Proposals which do not comply to these specifications will not be accepted.

Non-plagiarised research papers

A non-plagiarised research paper is a paper, which is considered to be your own creation, which does not copy somebody else's ideas. You must cite the sources of all ideas, facts, and information used that are not your own, even if you have put the information into your own words. Remember that you may use quotations of outstanding people, but in this case, you should cite them accordingly. Failure to do so is plagiarism, even if the oversight is unintentional.

Grading criteria for research papers

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<th>Clear objectives and thesis</th>
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<td>Logical development of body and thesis</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<td>Depth, appropriateness, and use of research</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adequate grammar, spelling, syntax, and punctuation</td>
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<td>Appropriate format and reference methods</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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Both proposals for research papers and research papers must be submitted through the Campus Virtual (section ‘Controles’).

Important dates

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<th>Before the Holy Week holiday</th>
<th>Choosing the unresolved issue and doing some preliminary reading (Important: two thirds of your references must be from the Campus libraries)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second week after the holiday (deadline: Wednesday, April 21)</td>
<td>Submitting your one-page proposal for your research topic (only .doc and .pdf documents will be accepted)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wednesday, May 12, 2010</strong></td>
<td><strong>Submitting your research paper</strong> (only .doc and .pdf documents will be accepted)</td>
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**HOW TO WRITE A LINGUISTICS ESSAY**

For most of us this is where the crunch really comes. Reading about the subject is OK but having to write something intelligible about it is another matter. All that terminology, those diagrams! Well it isn’t so difficult provided you bear in mind a few basic rules. It’s the purpose of this chapter to say what these are.

First and foremost, in terms of importance, is **good preparation**. As far as linguistics is concerned this means approaching the subject with **the right mental attitude** – something I stressed at the outset. This is true of writing well about anything, of course, but nowhere more so than linguistics. In particular, I have been emphasising all along the importance of **thinking linguistically**. If you **think** linguistically then you **should** write linguistically. As we have seen, thinking linguistically means studying language, and language use, not with the intention of making socially derived judgements about ‘correctness’, but in a spirit of pure enquire. In the sense that linguistics has pretensions to be a science it is in the development of just such a neutrally, enquiring, attitude. Curiosity is the driving force of most scientific investigation; so be curious. Don’t be frightened to ask what may seem to be very basic questions. Most scientific discoveries have been made from going back to first principles, and whilst no one is expecting you to come up with any startlingly new insights, the same procedure holds good whatever the level of your enquiry. You have been asked to write an essay on word classes, for example. Well, before you begin doing anything ask yourself why we bother to put words into classes at all – why don’t we just have words? What does it mean to call something a ‘noun’ or a ‘preposition’? And then you can proceed to the issue which is probably at the heart of the question you have been set – ‘how do we determine which class a word belongs to?’ You may not put all of this thinking into your essay but it is important in laying the groundwork from which your essay will emerge.

Why is this so? The simple answer here is that most essay questions on linguistics will require you to consider a problem of some kind. They may not directly state what that is, but it’s there nonetheless. It’s important, therefore, to develop a **problem-solving attitude** [...].

Remember also, that whilst you’re looking at language as if through a microscope, what you are examining is a living organism, which is changing even as you are examining it. This is crucial, because most grammars which you consult will be out of date. Steven Pinker, in talking about intransitive verbs says categorically ‘Some verbs, like *dine*, refuse to appear in the company of a direct object noun phrase’. So, we can’t say *Melvin dined the pizza* (1995, pp. 112-13). True enough, but it’s not uncommon to come across the boss dined his secretary. Don’t be frightened, then, in your essays, to challenge what you read. The raw material on which all language study is built is your own inheritance. And this brings me to another important tip: try and **use your own examples**. This isn’t always possible because there are certain standard examples in the literature to which most people refer. But there’s a significant difference between an essay which relies on examples from textbooks, whether it’s types of phrases, synonyms, or tone groups, and one where the writer has taken the pains to generate and analyse, his or her own examples.

Once you have done your investigating, and gathered your material the next task is to organise it. First of all, **make sure you know what is expected of you**. This may seem fairly obvious, but it’s very easy to allow your attention to wander in an essay and stray into areas of irrelevance. This is usually a sign that the writer doesn’t know how to answer the question, or conversely, has become so interested in one small area as to get sidetracked. Keep your eye always on the central issue. If you are answering a sociolinguistic question on the chief accent innovations which are currently productive, make sure you keep to the issue of accent and don’t stray into dialect. [...] Any kind of writing has to have an element of creativity about it if it’s going to be lively and interesting. Indeed, if you have done your preparatory thinking about the subject you may well have generated a lot of ideas which you can only sort out in the process of writing.
Try and think of your essay as an opportunity to do just that rather than just another hurdle and you will end up with a more interesting piece of work. [...] Having got the structure, methodology, and purpose of a linguistics essay clear, however, it’s time to consider more closely ways of proceeding with the actual task of writing [...] To begin with, use your opening paragraph to state exactly what it is you are going to do, and then make sure that you do it. [...] If you set out what you intend to do in this way then the rest of the essay will take shape naturally. After the introduction comes the development section. [...] The final part of the essay is the conclusion.

[...] Let’s just recap on what we have said so far. First on the list is the importance of good preparation. This means approaching the topic with the right mental attitude, in particular, developing a problem-solving attitude, being curious, and using your own examples. In other words, thinking linguistically. Next, when you come to write your essay, make sure you know what is expected of you, that is, keep to the terms of reference of the question set. [...] And finally, lay your essay out using the broad divisions of introduction, development, and conclusion.

[...] And lastly, to end on an encouraging note, linguistics is one subject where it’s possible to make your own contribution. As I said at the beginning, no one is expecting you to invent a new theory, but there are always fresh usages, and new bits of linguistic structure, which are continually emerging. In contrast with literary texts, the ‘text’ of linguistics is continuously evolving. It’s not fixed and finite but endlessly fertile and self-renewing.