

LING001 – Fall 2003 – Final Exam

General Instructions

This is a take-home exam. It is being handed out in class on December 8, 2003, and it is due by 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday, December 17, 2003.

In completing this exam, you may spend as much time as you like, and make reference to whatever sources you like, including the on-line course notes. We also encourage you to find ideas and examples in the library or on the internet. The only constraints are that you must do the work yourself, without the participation or help of anyone else, and you must follow the usual principles about citation of sources, use of quotation marks to identify the words of others, and so on.

The completed exam should be turned in on ordinary 8.5x11 paper, rather than in a blue book. All pages must be numbered and must have your name on them (for example as a header). You should indicate the total number of pages in the exam (e.g. "Page 1 of 8"), and all the pages should be stapled together.

Please hand the exam in to the Linguistics Department Office, 3600 Market St., Suite 501A. Be sure that you give it to someone in the office who can put it in the right place: do not just slip it under the door or leave it in someone's mail box. If you need to turn in the exam at a time when the Linguistics Office is closed, please contact your TA to make arrangements, but in any case, be sure that you give it directly to a person who knows what to do with it.

If you need to submit the exam remotely, you may make an arrangement to email it to your TA. However, in this case, be sure to allow enough time for us to verify that we can retrieve your exam from the email, print it correctly using your selected fonts, etc., and for you to resend it (perhaps on paper) if there is a problem. If you need to send a paper copy from a remote location, please get instructions in advance from your TA.

Exam Structure

The exam consists of a single essay, written on a topic chosen from a set of four alternatives given below. You will be graded on the content, clarity and persuasiveness of your exposition, as well as on the number, correctness and relevance of the particular examples and facts that you use to illustrate or support your general points.

It's important for your essay to make a coherent point, rather than just exhibiting a lot of perhaps-relevant but unorganized information. If you want, you may set your discussion in a larger context, as long as the defined topic is covered clearly and the larger context is helpful in making your argument. When one of the essay topics asks a series of questions, you need not structure your essay to address the questions in the same order that they are asked, nor even pose and answer the specific questions explicitly, as long as your essay clearly addresses all of the cited questions at some point.

It's also important for your essay to be solidly grounded in documented facts and research results, and to be well furnished with appropriate, clear and specific examples of linguistic analysis. Do not spin out your own opinions and reactions without such grounding. You should spend at least as much time doing research and planning your essay as writing it.

Q: How long should the essay be?

A: As long as it needs to be to make your points clearly and effectively, and no longer.

Exam Questions (answer one of four)

1. How can concepts and research results from linguistics clarify the discussion of public policy issues?

In your answer, discuss at least three of the following five (educational) issues: techniques for reading instruction; foreign language teaching and language requirements; bilingual education for immigrant children; cochlear implants and oralism vs. manualism in education of the deaf; and the educational use of African-American Vernacular English (“Ebonics”).

Discuss at least one additional issue from outside the area of educational policy.

2. In his posthumous essay *On Language*, first published in 1836, Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote (in Heath's 1988 translation):

The *articulated sound*, the foundation and essence of all speech, is extorted by man from his physical organs through an impulse of his soul; and the animal would be able to do likewise, if it were animated by the same urge.

How might we construe von Humboldt's reference to the soul in current scientific terms, and otherwise make a sympathetic translation of his point into contemporary intellectual discourse? What facts tend to support or undermine his idea (as you have re-interpreted it)?

3. Natural language is full of ambiguity at all levels. For example, words may be ambiguous in meaning; sentences may be ambiguous in structure; pronouns may be ambiguous in reference; and the relationship of one phrase to another may also be ambiguous.

Sometimes ambiguities are used intentionally: as a joke, or to permit deniable communication of something questionable (double entendre), or to communicate the equivalence itself (as in Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign slogan “in your heart you know he's right,” where the two meanings *conservative* and *correct* were both intended). However, most ambiguities in actual usage are unintentional. Furthermore, every piece of speech or writing contains many such unintended ambiguities.

Although these pervasive unintentional ambiguities do not appear to add any value to the communication, they normally do not cause any problems either. Why not? What distinguishes troublesome ambiguities, which hinder communication or lead to misunderstanding, from harmless ones?

Whatever tack you take on this essay, be sure that your discussion is well furnished with specific examples of ambiguity: where possible, these should be examples from published texts, interview transcripts or the like, rather than examples that you make up yourself.

4. Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow* is full of scientific metaphors and analogies. This question is based on a passage from the middle of the novel, comparing alphabetic writing to oil refining.

The background: In the pre-WWII USSR, Vaslav Tchitcherine has been shipped off to Baku to serve on the Central Committee for the New Turkic Alphabet, where he is assigned to the Uvular Plosive Subcommittee. The committee is riven by political infighting, and in particular, Igor Blobadjian, representing the Velar Plosive Subcommittee, "is fanatically attempting to steal **g**'s from Tchitcherine's Committee, and change them to **g**'s, using loan-words as an entering wedge... There is a crisis over which kind of **g** to use in the word *stenography*..." After trading sneers and acts of sabotage, "... Tchitcherine transliterates the opening sutra of the holy Koran into the proposed NTA, and causes it to be circulated among the Arabists at the session, over the name of Igor Blobadjian ... This is more than blasphemy, it is an invitation to holy war."

Blobadjian, "pursued through the back end of Baku," winds up drowned in an oil well.

Pursuing Blobadjian's interior monologue, Pynchon writes:

How alphabetic is the nature of molecules. One grows aware of it down here: one finds Committees on molecular structure which are very similar to those back in the NTA plenary session. "See: how they are taken out from the coarse flow – shaped, cleaned, rectified, just as you once redeemed your letters from the lawless, the mortal streaming of human speech... These are our letters, our words: they too can be modulated, broken, recoupled, redefined, co-polymerized one to the other..."

Explain and discuss this analogy between orthography and chemical engineering.