

Linguistics 001 Fall 2000 Final Exam

General Instructions

This is a take-home exam. It is being handed out in class on December 11, 2000, and it is due at (or before) the end of the scheduled exam period for this course, namely 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday, December 20, 2000.

In completing this exam, you may spend as much time as you like, and make reference to whatever sources you like, including the course text and the on-line course notes. Note that you are positively encouraged 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 should be numbered and should have your name on them (for example as a header). The first page should include an indication of the total number of pages in the exam, and all the pages should be stapled together.

Please hand the exam in to the Linguistics Department Office, Room 619, Williams Hall. 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, you can leave it at the guard desk of the 37th St. entrance to the quad, addressed to Prof. Mark Liberman. Again, be sure that you give it to someone who knows what to do with it.

If you need to submit the exam from a remote location, you may send it by email to all of us:

| | |
|------------------|-------------------------------|
| Atissa Banuazizi | atissa@babel.ling.upenn.edu |
| Tara Sanchez | tsanchez@babel.ling.upenn.edu |
| Mark Liberman | myl@cis.upenn.edu |

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 contact us for instructions.

Exam Structure

The exam consists of two sets of essay topics. You should write two essays, picking one topic from the first set and one topic from the second set.

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.

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 arguments. Note also that if an essay topic asks a series of questions, you need not structure your essay to address the questions in the same order that they are asked, as long as you deal with all of the issues.

Essay 1

Write on one of the following two topics. Although your answer should take the form of a coherent essay, please keep in mind that in this case you are being asked to do some specific types of data collection and analysis before you write, and that your essay should be so full of the results as to be almost an annotated catalogue of examples.

1. The recent trend is for new company names to be invented by specialist name consultants like Landor Associates and Master-McNeil Inc. One common pattern is to make up new words containing echoes of old ones (**Agilent**, **Verizon**, **Meritor**), though other patterns are also used (**Deep Bridge**, **CompassPoint**).

Discuss the sorts of linguistic analysis that appear to go into these choices. In particular, consider the analysis of new company names at different levels of linguistic structure, and the psychological associations that may arise at each level.

If you like, you can do the same sort of analysis in the case of new brand names, and discuss similarities and differences between recent practices in naming companies and naming brands. You can also consider changes in fashions for naming companies and brands over time, or differences in brand-naming cultures from one industry to another (e.g. the drug industry vs. the automobile industry).

Be sure to draw your conclusions on the basis of a large enough set of examples. You should make a large annotated list of examples before starting to write your essay. Internet search is probably the best way to find your examples.

2. 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 multiple such unintended ambiguities. Although these unintended 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? If you like, you can also consider this question from the point of view of computer programs that try to analyze, or in some sense to understand, English text.

In order to find raw material for your essay, look in published texts (such as newspaper stories or technical articles), for several examples each of lexical, structure and pronoun-reference ambiguities. In addition to the expected harmless ambiguities, see if you can find some ambiguities that hinder comprehension, or actually leave you in doubt as to the meaning of the passage.

For clarification, below you will find simple examples of lexical, structural and pronoun-reference ambiguities in a recent DP story. These are the common and harmless kind of examples that are normally resolved by readers without being noticed.

In the phrase "six Chi Omega sisters are being forced to leave their house for breaking several national chapter rules", the verb *leave* means something like "to remove oneself from association with or participation in", rather than "to go out of" or "to bequeath." The context of the story resolves this **lexical** ambiguity.

In the phrase "Three others were told they must become inactive members for a certain period of time." Anyone reading the story would understand that this means that the inactive status applies for a certain period of time, not that the telling occupied a certain period of time; but the sentence is **structurally ambiguous**, so that the time adverbial might modify either the clause whose verb is *told* or the clause whose verb is *become*.

In the phrase "the committee told the involved members of the executive board that their punishments were harsher because they were expected to be "role models"', the reader understands that the pronouns *their* and *they* are meant to refer to "the involved members of the executive board" rather than to (the members of) "the committee", though these are cases of ambiguous **pronoun reference**, as most pronouns are.

Essay 2

Write an essay on one of the following three topics:

1. How can concepts and 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. The American linguist Edward Sapir wrote in 1924:

The outstanding fact about any language is its formal completeness . . . To put this . . . in somewhat different words, we may say that a language is so constructed that no matter what any speaker of it may desire to communicate . . . the language is prepared to do his work . . . The world of linguistic forms, held within the framework of a given language, is a complete system of reference . . .

What would it mean for this to be false? What does it mean if it is true? How can you square this quote with the fact that Sapir is also associated with the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*, crudely expressed as the slogan “language determines thought,” or more precisely expressed by Sapir as:

We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation . . .

If you choose to answer this question, be sure that you can cite specific facts from at least two languages to exemplify your analysis.

3. 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.

Von Humboldt is arguing that the human disposition to communicate via spoken language is not entirely or even primarily determined by the construction of our vocal organs, but rather by some more fundamental characteristic, which he refers to as the “soul.”

How might we construe von Humboldt’s reference to the soul in current scientific terms? Under this interpretation, what facts tend to support or undermine his position?