

External Examiners Report

MPhil and Mst in General Linguistics and Comparative Philology

External examiner: Dr David Adger, Reader in Linguistics, Queen Mary, University of London

Date of Examiner's Meeting: 29.6.05

1. Standards

Once again this year I looked at almost all distinction level marks, fails and borderlines, as well as a further selection of papers, and I read almost all of the dissertations. The quality was roughly the same as last year: that is to say, extremely good overall, with some outstanding students, and few students who were weak, but none excessively so. Unlike in previous years, it was unnecessary to conduct any viva voce examinations, as all students were clearly in the pass or distinction range.

I reported both last year and the previous year that "The standards displayed are clearly appropriate for Masters level work, given external reference criteria such as the Dearing report and QAA benchmarking statements. " This remains true of the work that I saw this year.

2. Assessment Tools

The coursework/essay mode of assessment for syntax appears to be working well. I understand that the way that the assessment is put together for a final mark takes the coursework on a pass/fail basis, with the mark being awarded on the basis of the essay. This seems like a good approach, but I'd like to see it specified in the documentation.

Paper A, which is an important and innovative element of the assessment regime, has been restructured somewhat following discussion among the examiners. I think that the new structure, with some data questions, is an improvement. There do not seem to be any spotted answers this year. However, in order to ensure that students answer across the spectrum of areas of linguistics, I think that some thought should be applied to where in the paper the 'data analysis' questions are situated.

The guidelines for marking are working very well, I think. It is clear that assessors are paying close attention to the criteria and there were very few cases where marks needed to be resolved. In almost all cases I looked at, I agreed with the internal markers joint decision.

3. Procedures

I think it is also clear that the guidelines for the award of Distinction are now working very well, after some discussion in previous years. This year, the criteria picked out just those students who really showed distinction level performance, and I think it is no longer the case that Oxford students have a much harder task in getting a distinction than students elsewhere, and are do not disadvantaged when it comes to applying for postgraduate funding. However, I think some more thought needs to be given to the criteria for award of distinction at the MSt level. Most of this years candidates achieved low distinction level marks in some proportion

of their papers, with only a couple achieving marks that would have got them a distinction in that paper at MPhil level. This means that the distinctions awarded at MSt level were for work which was just barely in the range, and I think that this is because of the way the criteria are specified. It might be wise to tighten these up slightly, so as to ensure that just the distinguished candidates are recognized. However, I would recommend that previous years results be looked at as a guide. This year there were a lot of distinctions awarded at MSt level, and my intuition was that this set of candidates was not really outstanding when compared to previous years; however, the Committee will be able to use better data than I have to come to a decision on this.

Overall the administration of the examinations process was extremely good (although, once again, there were posting problems due to the Royal Mail not living up to their obligations). One thing I would recommend for my successor is that he or she be sent some proportion of the dissertations before the final meeting, otherwise there is barely enough time to do all the necessary reading before the examiners' meeting.

One of the things that examiners are asked to do is to provide a recommendation for readmission at Dphil level. At the moment there are no real guidelines for this, and I think that it was difficult to thereby come to really principled decisions about readmission. I would recommend that some thought be put into developing broad guidelines about normal expectations for readmission to Dphil.

There was one, I thought, unnecessary disruption to the process. The examiners had decided, since there were no vivas, to individually inform students of their overall result, and whether they were to be readmitted to Dphil. This seems a logical and humane way to inform students, especially before the end of term social gathering where they say goodbye to their classmates etc. However, this process was interrupted in the middle by someone from the Examination Schools, who proceeded to interrogate us about what we were doing. Considering that we completely constituted the examination board, and that the results that we were informing the students of had been agreed by us at the examiners' meeting that morning, this interruption seemed to me to be unwarranted and unnecessarily bureaucratic. The students needed to be at the Examination Schools in case there were to be vivas, and to simply send them away without informing them of their results (especially when there actually have been vivas), when some of them were leaving the country is clearly unacceptable. The process adopted seemed to me to be completely fair, and I was perplexed by the interruption from Schools.

GUIDANCE TEMPLATE – UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Title of report	<i>Committee for Linguistics and Philology</i>
Link to programme specification	http:// <i>Please leave this section for office completion</i>
Date of report	11th July 2005
Academic year	Exam period report applies to e.g. 2004/05
JACS codes	<i>Please leave blank for office completion</i>
Departments (optional)	Dr David Adger
Instructions Please complete the following template, typing your text into the box beneath each heading, as indicated. If you wish to make comments, please ensure that these are also reflected in your full written report. Please only type into the spaces provided, using simple text formatting such as bold & italic. A list of supported formatting can be found at the end of this template.	

Home institution and/or other professional/institutional affiliation of external examiners.
<i>Queen Mary, University of London</i>

'In the view of the examiners, the standards set for the awards are appropriate for qualifications at this level, in this subject.'
Is the above statement correct (Yes/No)
yes
If you have stated 'no', or if you wish to give additional information, please do so below.

'In the view of the examiners the standards of student performance are comparable with similar programmes or subjects in other UK institutions with which they are familiar.'
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'In the view of the examiners, the processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards are sound and fairly conducted.'
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Where appropriate, a description or bullet point list of any particular strengths or distinctive or innovative features in relation to standards and assessment processes, that would be worth drawing to the attention of external audiences.

Where appropriate a description or bullet point list of actions taken by the HEI in response to the report. This would be completed subsequently by the HEI, normally in response to stated shortcomings.
Type your text here <i>This field will be completed by the University of Oxford, if necessary, before the end of the academic year following that for which the report is provided.</i>

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- 1) If there are any statements above to which 'No' has been given as an answer***
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Queries concerning content will be raised individually with external examiners as they arise.

MSt and MPhil in General Linguistics and Comparative Philology

Trinity Term, 2005

Report of the Examiners

- 1. Examination Arrangements.** There were six MSt candidates and 10 MPhil candidates. The examination took place on 16th and 17th June, with the examiners' meeting taking place on 6th July. Examiners and assessors were as follows:

Examiners

Dr D. Adger (Queen Mary, University of London; External)
Dr J. S. Coleman (Wolfson; Chairman)
Dr M. Dalrymple (Linacre)
Professor A. J. Willi (Worcester)

Assessors

Professor D. Cameron (Worcester)
Professor T. M. O. Charles-Edwards (Jesus)
Dr S. Clark (Keble)
Dr D. F. Cram (Jesus)
Dr E. L. Keane (Christ Church)
Dr E. Lawson (Phonetics Laboratory)
Professor M. D. Maiden (Trinity)
Dr J. H. W. Penney (Wolfson)
Dr I. P. Rumfitt (Univ)
Mr J. C. Smith (St Catherine's)
Dr M. E. Tucker (Wolfson)
Dr I. M. C. Watson (Christ Church)
Mr C. J. Wells (St Edmund Hall)

26 final papers were set. The list of MPhil thesis titles was:

Studies in Homeric *-numi* verbs
Why is an Italian nightmare an ugly dream
Explorations in Diachronic Syntax [comparatives in Ancient Greek]
Complex verbs in Persian
The typology of the dual in Homer
The syntax and semantics of causative constructions
The pro-drop phenomena in Mandarin Chinese

Biak Morphosyntax
 The stress patterns of Hawaiian
 The 'littera'-rule in Latin
 Post-Wende language change in Neuem Deutschland
 Attitudes to Anglicisms in German

In addition, one MSt candidate offered an optional thesis in lieu of a paper.

Syntax was assessed by a combination of coursework and assessed essay.

The number of candidates offering each paper was:

Paper	MPhil	MSt
Linguistic Theory	12	7
Phonetics and Phonology	3	
Syntax	6	1
Semantics	4	
Historical and Comparative Linguistics	1	
Theory of Translation	2	2
Sociolinguistics	1	2
Computational Linguistics	1	
Philosophy of Logic and Language	1	
Morphology		1
Psycholinguistics	1	
Comparative Grammar of Italic and Ancient Greek	2	
Comparative Grammar of Greek and Sanskrit	1	
Comparative Grammar of Greek and Old Irish	1	
Historical Grammar of Italic and Ancient Greek	2	
Historical Grammar of Greek and Sanskrit	1	
Historical Grammar of Greek and Old Irish	1	
Texts in Italic and Ancient Greek	2	
Texts in Greek and Sanskrit	1	
Texts in Greek and Old Irish	1	
History of German	1	
History of French		1
History of French and German	1	
Structure of German	1	
Structure of French		1
Structure of French and German	1	

There were no vivas, and all candidates passed. Four distinctions were awarded in the MPhil, and five in the MSt. The examiners asked for a copy of the thesis *Biak Morphosyntax* to be deposited in the Bodleian Library, as the examination regulations allow, on account of the fact that it includes extensive documentation of a hitherto poorly-documented language.

2. **Complaints.** Two candidates lodged complaints with the Proctors immediately after sitting the exam papers. In summary, the complaints were: a) that the exam questions did not cover the topics covered in the course; b) the number of exam questions was fewer than previously; c) an exam paper was not adequately checked. In order to reply to (a), the Chairman consulted the tutors in question and obtained a list of the tutorial topics. He was then able to confirm to the Proctors that the exam questions *did* relate to the topics of the candidates' tutorials. Complaints (b) and (c) were factually incorrect. The Chairman's replies to the complaints were accepted by the Proctors.
3. **Syntax assessment.** It was unclear from the regulations how the coursework and essay components of the Syntax assessment should be combined. It was agreed to evaluate the coursework on a pass/fail basis, with the overall grade for this option determined by the essay. We **recommend** that this be clarified for future examinations. We **suggest** that students who fail the coursework in the first year of the MPhil should be offered the opportunity to either retake the coursework in the second year or to choose a different option paper.
4. **Thesis titles.** Not for the first time, several candidates submitted MPhil theses with titles that differed from that which had been approved by the Committee. As this did not amount to a consequential change of topic in any case, we ignored this technical breach of the regulations. We **recommend** that the Committee amends its rules so that (a) the topic, not the title, of the MPhil thesis should be approved by the Committee; (b) prior to submission of the thesis, the title should be agreed by the candidate's supervisor.
5. **Distinctions in the MSt.** As noted above, five of the six MSt candidates fulfilled the new criteria for a distinction in the MSt. Without prejudice to the achievements of the candidates, the examiners considered that the new criteria are probably now too generous, and **suggest** that the distinction criterion for MSt papers should be altered, to either two marks of 72 or higher, or an average greater than 70 on all three papers.
6. **Data questions in section E.** We noted that some candidates had a very narrow range of subjects in the Linguistic Theory paper. Under this year's regulations, it was possible, for example, to offer two questions from the phonetics and phonology section, and a third data question on phonetics or phonology. Similarly, it was possible to offer two questions in syntax as well as the syntax data question. No action needs to be taken to address this, as the Committee has already agreed a change in the rubric.

7. **Recommendations concerning readmission to DPhil** were considered for each candidate, irrespective of whether they had yet applied for readmission. The examiners found it helpful to frame their recommendations in terms of three categories: a) recommend or support readmission; b) not opposed to readmission; c) recommend against readmission. In practise, we realise that (a) and (b) both translate to permission to continue to the DPhil, but it was felt easier to frame the judgment in terms of these two distinct formulations. The examiners recommended against readmission of MPhil candidates obtaining less than 70 (the distinction level) in their thesis, and against readmission of MSt candidates not obtaining the distinction level.