

## **M.PHIL AND M.ST IN GENERAL LINGUISTICS AND COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY EXAMINERS' REPORT 2019**

### **1. Examination arrangements and procedures**

#### ***1.1. Board membership and meetings***

The members of this year's Board of Examiners were Prof. Deborah Cameron (Chair), Dr Sandra Paoli, Dr Alessandro Vatri and Prof. Ianthi Tsimpli (External Examiner, Cambridge University). Prof. Tsimpli took over from Prof. Kersti Börjars at very short notice when the latter found herself unable to continue as originally planned: the Board is grateful both for her willingness to step in and for her patience with the bureaucratic delays that occurred early on because of the lateness of her appointment.

The internal examiners met twice during the year: they held a first meeting to agree on the appointment of assessors for each paper, and a second meeting to check draft examination papers (the External Examiner, though not present, had also looked at the draft papers and sent comments to this meeting). The final Board meeting took place on 9 July 2019 with all examiners present, and Mrs. Silke Zahrir (Graduate Studies Administrator) in attendance. In the afternoon Prof. John Coleman also attended at the Board's request to conduct an oral examination, and we record our gratitude to him for this assistance.

#### ***1.2. Examinations***

35 candidates were examined this year: 14 1<sup>st</sup> year M.Phils, 11 2<sup>nd</sup> year M.Phils and 10 candidates for the M.St. Award decisions were made on all 10 M.St candidates and 10 out of 11 2<sup>nd</sup> year M.Phil candidates (the remaining 2<sup>nd</sup> year M.Phil candidate has been granted an extension to the deadline for the thesis, and the award decision will therefore be made at a later date).

*The following elements were examined by 3-hour paper:*

A: Linguistic Theory (compulsory for all M.St and 1<sup>st</sup> year M.Phil students)

B(i): Phonetics and Phonology

B(iv): Historical Linguistics

B(vi): History and Structure of Sanskrit

B(xi): Morphology

C(i): Comparative Grammar of: Greek; Sanskrit; Greek and Sanskrit

C(ii): Historical Grammar of Greek and Sanskrit

C(iii): Translation from, and linguistic comment upon, texts in Greek; Sanskrit; Greek and Sanskrit

D(i) History of: Latin; Greek and Old English; Indo-Iranian

D(ii) Structure of: French; Greek and Old English; Indo-Iranian

D(iii) Translation from, and linguistic comment upon, texts in: Latin; Greek and Old English; Indo-Iranian

*The following elements were examined by written submission:*

- B(ii): Syntax
- B(v): Psycholinguistics and Neurolinguistics
- B(vi): History and Structure of Spanish
- B(vii): Experimental Phonetics
- B(viii): Sociolinguistics
- B(xi): Special topic in Phonology

In addition, 8 M. Phil theses were examined. (A list of titles is provided below as Appendix A). No candidate for the M.St submitted a thesis this year.

### **1.3. *The determination of candidates' marks***

This year the Division introduced a revised marking scheme for students who began their courses in 2018 (i.e., M.St and first year M.Phil students). In the revised scheme the pass mark is 50 (previously it was 60) and there is a new Merit category for candidates who achieve an average mark of 65-69; the threshold for Distinction remains at 70. Students who registered before the new regulations came into force (i.e. second year M.Phil candidates and those resitting or returning from suspension) continued to be assessed under the old scheme.

All examination scripts, written submissions and theses were marked by two internal assessors. The External Examiner was asked to look at all cases where the internal markers had agreed a mark below the pass mark, at all scripts and submissions which had received the highest marks (in the 76-85 range), and at borderline cases. She also read a large sample of work where the marks fell within the 60-75 range and were not borderline.

The Board appointed a small subcommittee to consider applications for mitigating circumstances, as set out in the University's policy and guidance documents. This Mitigating Circumstances Panel consisted of Sandra Paoli (Chair) and Ianthi Tsimpli (External Examiner). It held a pre-meeting to consider applications in detail and agree recommendations which were then fed into the discussion of individual cases at the full Board meeting. There were five applications: for reasons of confidentiality the recommendations made by the subcommittee and the actions taken by the Board in these cases are set out in a separate appendix to this report (Appendix B).

The Board may at its discretion summon borderline candidates to be examined orally. This year it chose to summon one borderline (Merit/Distinction) M.St candidate, whose mark for the relevant paper was raised as a result.

## **2. Results**

### **2.1. *Summary***

In the M.Phil, 2 candidates were awarded Distinction, 5 candidates gained a Pass and one recorded a fail. (There was also one candidate who did not complete all parts of the examination and was therefore deemed to have failed; this was a technicality, however, since the candidate had already written to the DGS to inform him of their decision to withdraw.) As noted above, one M.Phil student has an extension on the thesis and the final result is still

pending. Finally, one candidate registered for the M.Phil was awarded the M.St: this is a Mitigating Circumstances case which is discussed further in Appendix B.

In the M.St, 2 candidates were awarded Distinction, 1 was awarded Merit and 7 gained a Pass. There were no failures.

Among the 14 1<sup>st</sup> year M.Phil candidates who took only Paper A, one candidate earned a mark of 70, 4 candidates gained marks between 65 and 69, 6 candidates passed with marks between 50 and 64, and 2 were given marks under 50 (they will have the opportunity to re-take the Paper next year, but the mark will be capped at 50). The 2<sup>nd</sup> year resit candidate failed for the second time. Some further remarks on the performance of candidates for Paper A are included in section 2.5 below.

## ***2.2. Distinctions and Prizes***

Four of the 20 candidates on whom award decisions were made in July 2019 were awarded Distinctions - two in the M.Phil (one of these a high Distinction), and two in the M.St (one following a Viva at which the candidate's performance led the Board to raise the original mark). This is a much lower number than last year's: in 2018, 13 out of 23 graduating students earned a Distinction. However, as the Board noted in last year's report, the 2018 results were exceptional: the fall in the number of students obtaining the highest marks this year does not seem to us to be a particular cause for concern, though we should continue to monitor the figures over time.

Last year, having been obliged to decide between two candidates whose performances were each outstanding by the criteria for their respective courses, the Board proposed to the Faculty that resources should if possible be found to award a prize for the best performance in each of our two degrees. Happily, a donation to the Faculty has made it possible for this proposal to be acted on: this year the already-established George Wolf Prize was re-designated specifically as a prize for the best M.St candidate, while a new Katrina Hayward prize was introduced for the best performance in the M.Phil.

It was agreed to award the Katrina Hayward prize to an outstanding candidate in comparative philology whose average mark was over 75 and whose thesis received a mark of over 80. The Board warmly congratulates this candidate on an exceptional performance. After some discussion it was decided that the George Wolf prize should not be awarded this year. The two M.St candidates who earned Distinctions were both borderline cases: while their achievements are undoubtedly commendable, their performances were not felt to be comparable with those of previous prize winners.

## ***2.3. Theses***

Theses were generally of a high standard: of the 8 submitted, 5 received marks of 70 or more, and one of those earned a mark over 80. One further thesis met the standard required to pass, while two received failing marks (in one of these cases the candidate subsequently withdrew).

The Board wishes to reiterate a proposal it made last year, that candidates offering theses should be required to provide brief abstracts as well as titles for approval. The non-specificity of the information provided about the nature and emphasis of some theses makes it difficult for the Board to select appropriate markers at the stage of the year when assessors have to be appointed. We note that some other Faculties in the Division (e.g. English) require thesis

abstracts, and the External Examiner confirmed that this is also the practice on the M.Phil in Linguistics at her home institution, Cambridge University.

#### **2.4. Failures**

Only one M.Phil candidate (apart from the one who withdrew during the examination period) failed to meet the standard required for the award of a degree. This is the same number as in 2018. The number of 1<sup>st</sup> year M.Phil students (2) who failed Paper A and will be offered an opportunity to resit it next year is also unchanged from 2018.

#### **2.5. Paper A**

In her general comments to the Board the External Examiner commended the thinking behind Paper A, which is designed to ensure that all candidates have acquired a reasonable grasp of linguistic theory. She noted, however, that the scope and level of difficulty of this Paper make considerable demands on candidates, especially those with little or no previous experience of studying linguistics, and some candidates evidently struggle to meet those demands. Overall, four candidates failed the Paper (out of a total of 25) and only two earned marks of 70+. Prof Tsimpli drew attention to a particular issue with the syntax section: though the questions were not, in her view, more difficult than the questions in other sections, candidates' performance was noticeably weaker. (The marks bear out this observation: of the 20 candidates who chose to answer a syntax question, more than a third received marks under 50.) The Board notes that last year our previous External Examiner, Prof. Kersti Börjars, also expressed concern about the standard of performance in Paper A and suggested this was an issue to which the Faculty should give careful consideration. This year's examiners reiterate that suggestion.

### **3. Procedural matters**

Communication with the Proctors' office and the Examinations Office was largely unproblematic this year, with decisions on extension requests being made in a timely manner and after full consultation. Communication between the Faculty Board and the Chair of Examiners was also improved, as expected, by the institution of a Graduate Studies Committee to which the Chair belongs. We are pleased to note that the Graduate Studies Administrator will be spending more time in the Faculty from 2020; there is no doubt this will help to make the process easier for the next Chair of Examiners.

This year's examining process has, however, revealed some other procedural problems on which the External Examiner commented. In particular, it is a problem - especially in borderline, disputed or otherwise problematic (e.g., failing) cases - that markers of exam scripts are not currently required to provide the Board with separate marks for each answer, or with comments explaining their numerical marks. Some assessors do provide this information, but we only have a standard marksheet for submissions and theses, on which markers write comments that will later be communicated to the candidate. The Board feels that there needs to be a more structured approach to the recording of exam marks: we could consider adopting a standard form like the one used for undergraduates, where marks for each question are accompanied by (very brief) comments that the Board can refer to if necessary. In some cases - in particular, where a student has failed an exam and will need to re-take it - it would be desirable for comments to be available to the candidate or their course supervisor for guidance on resit preparation. It seems anomalous that students who fail a paper examined by written submission receive quite extensive feedback, whereas those who fail a three-hour paper receive none. Prof Tsimpli also observed that in cases where comments were provided,

they did not always correspond clearly to the numerical marks: markers are reminded they need to make consistent use of the descriptors for the various mark bands.

The Board notes with regret that there were errors in the formatting of two philology papers this year. One of these, fortunately, had no consequences for the candidate, but future examiners should bear in mind the importance of having philology papers re-checked by setters before they are printed. The second error, which affected the rubric of a paper, arose because of a complex set of circumstances pertaining to a single individual: these are unlikely to be repeated, so there are probably no general lessons to be learned, but the mistake did constitute a mitigating circumstance for which the Board compensated by adjusting a mark (further details are given in Appendix B).

Though 35 students is not a large number, the range of options and topics covered by the M.Phil and M.St makes the examination of these candidates' work a complex undertaking whose smooth running is heavily dependent on the co-operation of a large number of people. The Chair recorded her thanks to the Graduate Studies administrator Mrs Zahrir, to her co-examiners Drs Paoli and Vatri, and to the many academic colleagues, in the Linguistics Faculty and other Faculties, who participated in this year's examination as assessors.

Deborah Cameron (Chair of Examiners)

Sandra Paoli

Alessandro Vatri

Ianthi Tsimpli (External Examiner)

10 July 2019

**APPENDIX A:****TITLES OF M.PHIL THESES**

Asymmetry in medial consonant processing in Mandarin

Aspect and modality in Brazilian Portuguese conditionals

Reading while listening and language comprehension

Ladino in Contact: Lexical Borrowing and Morphosyntactic Integration of Turkish and French Loans in Istanbul Judeo-Spanish

Koineization in Delphi

The Semantics and Syntax of Non-Finite Expressions of Purpose in the Greek of Herodotos' Histories

And the two lived happily ever after...