

M.PHIL AND M.ST IN LINGUISTICS, PHILOLOGY & PHONETICS

EXAMINERS' REPORT 2021

1. Examination arrangements and procedures

1.1. Board membership and meetings

The members of this year's Board of Examiners were Prof. Philomen Probert (Chair), Prof. Mary Dalrymple, Prof. Aditi Lahiri, and Prof. Ianthi Tsimpli (External Examiner, University of Cambridge).

The internal examiners met twice during the year: they held a first (remote) meeting to agree on the appointment of assessors for each paper, and a second (remote) meeting to check draft examination papers (the External Examiner had also looked at the draft papers and sent comments to this meeting). The final Board meeting took place over Microsoft Teams on 6 July 2021, with all examiners participating and Mrs Silke Zahrir (Graduate Studies Administrator) in attendance.

1.2. Adaptations in the light of COVID-19

This was the second year in which the examination arrangements were adapted in the light of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The main principles were those worked out last year by the University's Silver and Bronze Groups and the Humanities Division, in consultation with Faculty Board Chairs. However, owing to limitations to the capacity of Weblearn as a platform for on-line open-book exams, the Division introduced and required the use of Inspira for this year. A revised set of Examination Conventions was circulated to our students on 9 February 2021, and a further revised version was circulated on 27 May 2021 (because the Division had required us to add an update on this year's procedure for considering Mitigating Circumstances notices). The main adjustments applied to the M.Phil. and M.St. in Linguistics, Philology & Phonetics were the following:

- Modules that would normally have been assessed by means of a traditional three-hour examination were assessed instead by means of an on-line open-book examination, using Inspira in "Mixed Mode". With one exception (see just below) the format of papers was not changed, but half an hour of technical time was allowed at the end of the examination, in order to give candidates time to upload any answers (or parts of answers) that they had created outside Inspira.
- For the examination (D(iii-a) "Translation and/or Linguistic Commentary on Texts in Old Norse and Gothic", the format was varied slightly so that no translation was required.
- All theses and submissions were submitted on line.
- Both internal examiners' meetings and the final examiners' meeting took place remotely over Microsoft Teams.
- The afternoon of 6 July and the morning of 7 July 2021 were reserved for vivas over Microsoft Teams. In order to be fair towards candidates in different time zones, candidates were invited to register a preference in advance for their viva (if any) to take place in the morning or the afternoon (UK time). In the event, the three vivas that were held all took place on the morning of 7 July.
- A light-touch system was in place for candidates to register ways in which the global pandemic or any other factors might have affected their performance on examinations or assessments. Candidates had the opportunity to record any direct academic impact on their work for theses and submissions (e.g. arising from the unavailability of specific resources) via a template which they submitted along with the work itself. These impact statements were passed on to

markers along with the work, and were taken into account in marking. Where the pandemic or other factors had impacted on students' work in other ways, students had the opportunity to submit a Mitigating Circumstances notice.

- The examining board assessed the impact of the pandemic on the whole cohort by assessing overall outcomes and (where appropriate) paper outcomes against those of the years 2017–19, in accordance with the Academic Support Package published by the Humanities Division.

1.3. Examinations

37 candidates were examined this year: 15 first-year M.Phils, 7 second-year M.Phils and 15 candidates for the M.St. At the final examiners' meeting, award decisions were made on 13 of the 15 M.St. candidates and 5 of the 7 second-year M.Phils. These included some candidates who had been granted extensions, but whose marks—thanks to extraordinarily hard work on the part of our markers—were turned quickly enough to be confirmed at the final examiners' meeting. The other candidates had been granted extensions meaning that their award decisions would be made at a later date.

The following elements were examined by 3-hour on-line open-book exam:

- A: Linguistic Theory (compulsory for all M.St students on the Advanced Study track, and for all first-year M.Phil students)
- B(i): Phonetics and Phonology
- B(iv): Historical and Comparative Linguistics
- B(vi): History and Structure of Dutch
- B(vi): History of Church Slavonic
- B(x): Morphology
- D(i) History of Old Norse and Gothic
- D(ii) Structure of Old Norse and Gothic
- D(iii) Translation from, and/or linguistic comment upon, texts in Old Norse and Gothic

The following elements were examined by written submission:

- B(ii): Syntax
- B(iii): Semantics
- B(v): Psycholinguistics and Neurolinguistics
- B(vii): Experimental Phonetics
- B(viii): Sociolinguistics
- B(ix): Computational Linguistics
- B(x): Special project in Pragmatics

In addition, 5 M. Phil theses and 2 M.St. theses were considered at the final examiners' meeting. The titles of these theses are listed in Appendix A below.

A further 2 M.Phil. theses and 1 M.St. thesis had either been granted an extension or were by candidates who had been granted an extension on other modules, meaning that they would be considered at a later date. The titles of these theses are also listed in Appendix A.

1.4. Determination of candidates' marks

All examination scripts, written submissions, and theses were marked by two internal assessors. In one instance, the initial assessors were unable to agree on a mark and a third marker was asked to adjudicate. The External Examiner also looked at this case. She further looked at two scripts in which candidates had attempted fewer questions than the rubric required (one of these

was a mitigating circumstances case and is discussed further in Appendix B), and at all cases where the internal markers had agreed a mark below the pass mark, and at those scripts and submissions receiving the single highest and lowest marks for the M.Phil. and for the M.St. In addition to reading these scripts and submissions, and the markers' comments where available, the External Examiner also read a considerable sample of other scripts and submissions (again with the markers' comments where available), including the lowest and highest scoring scripts and submissions for each module.

The Board had appointed a small subcommittee (consisting of Mary Dalrymple and Philomen Probert, with Ianthi Tsimpli present as an observer) to consider individual mitigating circumstances notices, as set out in the University's policy and guidance documents. In a partial reintroduction of the system which had been in place before the pandemic, this panel was tasked with banding this year's mitigating circumstances notices into three levels of seriousness, but this year the panel was not asked to assess the strength of any evidence submitted. Mitigating circumstances notices from 12 candidates had been submitted by the time of the final examiners' meeting; a further application arrived very shortly after the end of the examiners' meeting and before results were released, and was considered by confidential correspondence. For reasons of confidentiality the banding and actions taken by the Board in these cases are set out in a separate appendix to this report (Appendix B). For those final-year candidates whose outcomes could not be finalised at the time of the final examiners' meeting, these details will be provided in a later update to Appendix B, since the Board has not yet been able to decide on any actions to be taken. Any applications from further candidates will be considered at a later date, and will also be included in a later update to Appendix B.

In addition to taking individual mitigating circumstances into account, the examining board assessed the impact of the pandemic on the whole cohort, by assessing overall outcomes and (where appropriate) paper outcomes against those of the years 2017–19. In particular, this year's Academic Support Package required us to scrutinise the median mark for the three years 2016/17, 2017/18, and 2018/19, for modules which had at least 20 takers. If the two figures differed by more than three marks, we were required to scale marks in order to bring the figures to between two marks. If the figures differed by at least 3 marks, in either direction, we were required to undertake scaling to bring the 2021 median within 1 or 2 marks of the reference median. If the figures differed by under 3 marks, it was left to the discretion of the Board whether to undertake scaling. For the M.St. and M.Phil. in Linguistics, Philology & Phonetics, the only module with a sufficient cohort size to apply paper-level scaling was Paper A: Linguistic Theory. For this paper the Division had supplied median marks of 66, 66, and 60.5 for the three years 2016/17, 2017/18, and 2018/19, and a median of 64 for the three years combined. The median mark for this year's Paper A was also 64. At first glance, this year's median therefore matched the reference median precisely. However, the figures supplied by the Division took no account of the fact that our marking system had changed (as required by a change in Divisional policy) between 2017/18 and 2018/19. In order to compensate for this, the Board converted the median marks for 2016/17 and 2017/18 into the closest equivalents in the new system, thus arriving at median marks of 62, 62, and 60.5. The Board then took the mean of these three figures (61.5) as its "reference median". Since this year's median of 64 is within three marks of the reference median thus obtained, the Board was not required to undertake scaling. The Board observed that this year's median mark is nevertheless somewhat high compared to the reference median, but felt that it was not unacceptably so, and that unnecessary downward scaling of marks would be ungenerous in the light of the particularly difficult year this cohort has had, with little or no in-person teaching or opportunity to see or in some cases even meet tutors and fellow students.

The Board may at its discretion summon candidates to be examined orally. Of those candidates whose final outcome or (in the case of first-year M.Phil. students) Paper A mark were confirmed at this year's final examination, three were summoned for oral examination. In each case, the viva was offered because the examining board had a query about a module mark and/or the candidate's overall outcome, and decided to offer a viva to give the candidate the opportunity to raise their mark and/or overall outcome. Candidates whose results would be confirmed later were asked to keep a later date free (with the exact date depending on the candidate's submission deadlines) in case the Board summoned them for oral examination.

The Board also considered the distribution of overall outcomes in relation to those of other recent years, and noted that candidates' initial outcomes (based on the raw module marks submitted) would have resulted in a lower proportion of Distinctions compared to most recent years. With this in mind the Board was more generous than usual in awarding discretionary Distinctions to candidates whose result fell just below the normal threshold for a Distinction but whose performance overall gave confidence that a Distinction was a fair outcome, especially given the circumstances with which this year's candidates have had to contend. The Board does not consider that this should set a precedent.

2. Results (for candidates whose results were confirmed at the final examiners' meeting)

2.1 Summary

In the M.Phil, 2 candidates were awarded Distinction, 1 was awarded Merit, 2 gained a Pass and none failed.

In the M.St, 2 candidates were awarded Distinction, 4 were awarded Merit, 7 gained a Pass and none failed.

Among the 15 first-year M.Phil candidates who took only Paper A this year, 4 earned marks above 70, 4 earned marks between 65 and 69, 6 passed with marks between 50 and 64, and one got a failing mark between 40 and 49.

2.2 Distinctions

4 of the 18 candidates on whom award decisions were made at the final examiners' meeting were awarded Distinctions—2 in the M.Phil. and 2 in the M.St. This was only an interim tally, since four candidates had award decisions still outstanding, but so far the proportion of Distinctions was slightly lower than last year's (when 8 out of 27 graduating students earned a Distinction) and almost identical to the proportion in 2019 (when 4 out of 20 graduating students earned a Distinction).

2.3 Failures

Of the candidates on whom award decisions were made at the final examiners' meeting, none failed and no M.Phil. candidate was awarded the M.St. rather than the M.Phil. While this level of success is not seen every year, there have been other recent years in which no candidates failed and no M.Phil. candidate was awarded the M.St. instead of the M.Phil. (2015/16, 2017/18, and the most recent year 2019/20).

Of the 15 first-year M.Phil. candidates taking Paper A this year, one failed the paper (and one had their mark raised from a Fail to a Pass in consideration of mitigating circumstances; this case is discussed in more detail in Appendix B). In this respect, this year's cohort was slightly less successful than last year's, when no first-year M.Phil. candidate failed Paper A, but slightly more successful than those of 2017/18 (when 2 out of 9 candidates failed the paper) and 2018/19

(when 2 out of 14 candidates failed the paper). The candidate who failed this year will have the opportunity to retake the paper next year, although the mark will be capped at 50.

2.4 Theses

Theses were generally of a high standard. Of the 5 M.Phil. theses for which marks were confirmed at the final examiners' meeting, 3 received marks of 70 or over, 1 received a mark between 65 and 69, and 1 received a mark between 50 and 64.

Of the two M.St. (Research Preparation) theses considered at the final examiners' meeting, one received a mark between 65 and 69, and the other a mark between 50 and 64.

Following a recommendation from last year's examiners, candidates were asked to submit a short abstract at the same time as they submitted their thesis titles. This helped the Board to assign suitable markers, although in some instances a late change of thesis title came to light only once the thesis had been submitted, and in some other instances the subject-matter of the thesis was not a good match for the title (or for the abstract which had been submitted). In one instance, this resulted in a change of assessor at a late stage. The Board would like to recommend that in future years, candidates should be reminded to apply for a change of thesis title if the topic of their thesis has changed so that the previously agreed title is no longer suitable.

2.5 Paper A

In her general comments to the Board the External Examiner again commended Paper A, which is designed to ensure that all candidates have acquired a reasonable grasp of the main core areas of Linguistic Theory.

2.6 Prizes

This is the third year in which the Faculty will be able to award prizes both for the best performance in the M.St. (the George Wolf Prize) and for the best performance in the M.Phil. (the Katrina Hayward Prize). In order to give a chance to those candidates with award decisions still outstanding at the time of the final examiners' meeting, the decisions on which candidates should be awarded prizes were postponed until a later date.

3. Procedural matters

For the second year in a row, this was an exceptional year in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the main principles had been worked out last year, the need to replace Weblearn meant that once again some new infrastructure had to be put in place at speed. Inpera was not ideal in a number of respects, including but not limited to the following:

- Some of the scripts from candidates who typed directly into the boxes in Inpera had special characters turned into little squares, meaning that markers had to exercise their deductive skills to a greater than ideal degree. (The Faculty had requested the opportunity to test-run the submission of scripts to markers beforehand, so as to know what would happen to special characters at the marker's end, but this had not been feasible and we were assured that special characters could generally be pasted in. In practice, some of the special characters used by our candidates came through correctly but others did not.)
- Some of the candidates who created all or part of their answers outside Inpera had problems uploading their answers, for technical reasons such as an internet connection failure or because they found Inpera difficult to navigate. Candidates had the opportunity to explain what had happened, and the Board responded sympathetically (these cases are discussed further in Appendix B), but these episodes clearly caused distress which would have been better avoided.

- Candidates had evidently experienced information overload with the steady flow of guidance materials provided (via the dedicated website and all-student emails in addition to the Examination Conventions), and it was clear that not all of them had managed to absorb essential principles such as where to turn for technical help during an examination.

Needless to say, it was only thanks to the swift introduction of Inspira that we were able to run our assessment process at all this year, and the Chair would like to record her thanks to the Division for all the work that went into this on their part. Nevertheless, the Board notes that for future years the applicable principles are those laid out in the Examination Regulations, and that any change to these would need to be requested by the Faculty, and that any such request would be a decision of the Faculty Board.

A further change compared to last year was that the Academic Support Package replaced last year's Safety Net Policy. The Board appreciates the principles behind the Academic Support Package as a response to the pandemic, but would like to add a further comment on the scaling requirement. While we consider our response to this requirement to have been reasonable, we note that paper-level marks cannot be converted accurately from the old marking system to the new one without going back to the marks for individual questions (to which the Board no longer has access). Paper-level marks are means of question-level marks, and because the shape of the mark-scale has changed, taking the mean of question-level marks does not produce quite the same distribution of paper-level marks as it did before. (What used to be called a high pass mark—now called a merit mark—on an individual question is now further away from a low pass mark than it was before, relative to the size of the mark scale as a whole. For this reason, a high pass mark on one question has a bigger effect than it used to in compensating for comparatively low marks elsewhere, and a low pass mark has a similar effect in the opposite direction.)

Communication with the Proctors' Office and the Examinations Office went smoothly, in spite of the large amount of extra work that both offices had to handle as a result of the pandemic. Applications for extensions and requests for alternative arrangements and adjustments were handled promptly and sensitively. This was the second year in which several candidates were granted extensions meaning that their results could not be finalised at the final examiners' meeting, and the Board appreciates the reasons for this, and the hard work which has gone into these cases on the part of the Proctors' Office and the Education Committee. The Board notes, however, that the need to return to marking and examining at various points throughout the summer is burdensome for markers and examiners; it is to be hoped that in due course the number of long extensions granted can return to an absolute minimum.

Communication with the Faculty went smoothly too. In response to a recommendation of last year's Board, the Chair was invited to attend meetings of the Graduate Studies Committee for those items relating to Faculty policy on examinations and assessments. This was very helpful to her in understanding relevant Faculty policy, and not least in a year where policy had to evolve quickly and sensitively in response to developments at Divisional level.

Owing to a long delay in completing last year's examinations process (as a result of some long extensions which had been granted), the Faculty had not had the opportunity to agree its response to all the recommendations of last year's examiners. Some of those recommendations were nevertheless acted on this year (as noted in this report); this was the case where a small change of procedure was involved, rather than a change of policy that would need to be formally agreed by the Graduate Studies Committee and the Faculty Board. The Board would therefore like to reiterate its support for last year's larger recommendations to the Faculty: in particular, (a) the recommendation to consider requiring brief comments from all markers to explain all numerical marks, and (b) the

recommendation to consider introducing a minimum thesis mark requirement for a Distinction in the Research Preparation track of the M.St.

The examination of our M.Phil and M.St candidates is always a complex operation, and for the second year in a row the complexity has been infinitely greater still. With a certain sense of déjà vu, the Chair would like to record her heartfelt thanks to everybody involved for their extraordinarily hard work, patience, and support, and not least to the Graduate Studies administrator Mrs Zahir, to co-examiners Prof. Dalrymple, Prof. Lahiri, and Prof. Tsimpli, and to the many colleagues who acted as assessors under difficult circumstances. It has been an extraordinary privilege to work with all of you.

Philomen Probert (Chair of Examiners)

Mary Dalrymple

Aditi Lahiri

Ianthi Tsimpli (External Examiner)

19 July 2021

EXAMINERS' REPORT ON THE M.PHIL AND M.ST IN LINGUISTICS, PHILOLOGY & PHONETICS 2021

APPENDIX A: THESIS TITLES

(A) MPhil theses considered at the final examiners' meeting

- The Dative External Possessor or Dativus Sympatheticus in Old West Norse
- The distribution and frequency of subordinated double verb clusters in Dutch newspapers, 1946-2021. *Auxiliary* first or second?
- Explaining jokes: A critical analysis of the semantic mechanisms of verbal humour
- The 'Gay Male She': A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Feminine Pronoun Use Among Contemporary Cisgender Gay Men
- The Presidential Voice: A Critical Discourse Analysis of US State of the Union Addresses, 1993–2020

(B) MSt theses considered at the final examiners' meeting

- Habitual markers in European languages
- Have some respect, mate: An honorific treatment of address forms

(C) MPhil theses to be considered at a later date

- The numeral *yi* 'one' in the *yi*-deletion debate: The phonological evidence of encliticisation in Mandarin
- Phonology of 17th century New England vowels

(D) MSt theses to be considered at a later date

- An analysis of the Romanian 'third gender' and the grammatical influence of L-2 Greek