Style guide for term papers in linguistics

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This document is a brief guide for writing papers in linguistics, in particular term papers for a Hauptseminar. Most of what is discussed here is not actually specific to linguistics and could be applied to writing papers in other subjects.

1 General style and formatting

A written paper is a distinct way of presenting scholarly work, different from an oral presentation or, say, a newspaper article. It serves a different purpose and is used under different circumstances than these other media, and thus there are different requirements on its style and formatting. This may seem obvious. However, it is often the case that you will be asked (as a student for a course, or as a scholar for a conference) to take something which was originally an oral presentation and turn it into a written paper. Some of the most common examples of bad style in written papers arise in such a situation, where some element appropriate to an oral presentation has been carried over unchanged.

Oral presentations generally have clear time restrictions, and it is imperative that what the speaker says and what is presented for the audience on handouts or slides be easy to understand quickly, in a single pass. This means that sentences and paragraphs should be short and relatively simple, and presented visually in such a way as to bring out the logical connections. Handouts and slides thus make heavy use of bulleted lists, explicit numbering of points and very short logical units.

Written papers are not subject to the same constraints. There is generally not a time restriction, and it is reasonable to expect the reader to take more time working through the text at her own pace, occasionally backtracking to make sure that she has understood correctly. There often **are** restrictions on length, however, thus the formatting of the written material should be rather different than in a handout or slide. Explicitly formatted lists with extra space and special characters indicating logical relationships between points are easy to read, but take up space. In a written paper it is more appropriate to indicate logical structure with nuanced linguistic structures – embedded clauses, parentheticals etc. This actually allows more complex material to be presented in a written paper than in a talk, thus it should be taken advantage of.

Therefore, a written paper should have no (or very few) bulleted or explicitly numbered lists. It should also have rather longer paragraphs than a handout – normally at least three sentences each. The writer of a paper should also pay very close attention to how she gets across the logical structure of her discussion and arguments. This must be indicated primarily textually, not

typographically – i.e. with words and sentences, not line breaks and special symbols. The logical connection between adjacent sections and paragraphs should be laid out by use of appropriate linguistic means, words and phrases like *therefore*, *however*, *as a result of this...*, *the motivation for this assumption is...*, *first...second...third...*, *on the other hand*. Of course, in order to use these expressions properly, the writer must first make sure that the paper is organized in some logically comprehensible fashion, rather than just being a series of ideas jumbled together without structure.

Finally, in a written paper correct use of the language is even more important than in oral presentations and other more informal situations. This is especially important for people writing in a language which they do not speak natively, but applies to everyone, as native speakers are also capable of making mistakes. If you are writing a paper, you have the time and opportunity to formulate your sentences carefully and double-check the meaning, usage and spelling of the words and expressions you use. There is little excuse for basic errors, especially repeated ones. If you use a word you are not sure about, look it up. If you are not comfortable with English (or German, or French...) punctuation, check a style manual. Note e.g. that English and German have very different rules about when to use a comma, and reading a text that uses the style of punctuation from the wrong language is extremely annoying, if not confusing.

2 Formatting of linguistic material

In any field of study, there will be discussion of material which must be somehow set off visually from the rest of the text for one reason or another. This is obviously the case for anything which is not actually text – diagrams, pictures, special symbols and so forth. In linguistics, we have the additional complication that much of what we want to discuss is textual, is language itself. As the object of study, it must be set off somehow so that it is not confused with the actual text of the discussion. E.g., we need to be able to make clear whether we are talking about the theoretical idea of the phoneme, or the linguistic properties of the English word *phoneme*.

This is a standard issue, and thus there are standard ways of dealing with it. That is, there are standard notational conventions for distinguishing linguistic material that is the object of discussion from the text that constitutes the discussion itself. We could of course imagine lots of different ways to do this, but it is bad style and counterproductive to use anything but the standard methods. We have already seen the first one – linguistic material that is the object of study is set in italics, when discussed within the text. I.e. if I want to talk about English modal verbs I might mention *may*, *can* and *must*. If these words are from a language other than the one I am writing in, or if their meanings are otherwise unclear, I can indicate them in single quotes. So if I want to talk about German modal verbs I might mention *dürfen* 'may', *können* 'can' and *müssen* 'must'. Failure to use italics and single quotes in this way may not seem like a big deal, but it can make papers surprisingly difficult to read. Normally it is possible to figure out what is intended, but it can take significant extra time, and there is no reason to put such extra strain on your reader – especially if she is giving you a grade.

The second standard deals with longer chunks of linguistic material to be

discussed, usually sentences. These are usually not given in the middle of the text, but are presented on a separate line with numbering. This is more or less how example sentences should look:

(1) a. This is a nicely formatted example sentence.
b. * This example ungrammatical is.

Exactly how you set up the numbers and letters does not matter much (unless the people asking you to write the paper give specific instructions). However, a few points are important. The examples should always be on their own lines, not incorporated into the main text. They should also always be numbered, and the top level of numbering should be Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3...), not Roman numerals (I, II, III...) or letters. If your numbering is to have hierarchical structure, the next level down should of course use a distinct sequence of symbols, preferably lowercase letters as in examples 1a and 1b above. When you refer to the sentences in the text, you should then always use the appropriate numbers (and letters if appropriate) – and be very careful that if you make a change in the numbering (e.g. if you add in a new sentence in the middle somewhere) you make all of the necessary changes elsewhere to keep things consistent.

There is also a special standard format for example sentences from other languages. This format uses three lines to present the original, then a literal word-for-word gloss, and then a proper translation:

(2) Der Sepp sagt, dass er einen neuen Filzhut braucht.
the Sepp says that he a new felt-hat needs
'Sepp says he needs a new Fedora.'

Important here is the fact that the word-for-word gloss is lined up with the original text so that we can see which word in the gloss goes with which word in the original, and that the translation is given in single quotes – just as when we indicate the meaning of a word in the main text. In cases where the structure is completely obvious, it is acceptable to use just a two-line format leaving out the word-for-word gloss, but you should do this sparingly, and only when you can be sure that the intended audience will be able to understand the example:

(3) Jens trinkt Milch.
'Jens drinks Milk.'

Note, incidentally, that if you are reproducing an example sentence from some other source, it is not acceptable to scan or photocopy it out of the original and paste it as an image into your paper. At best, this looks bad. At worst, it is difficult to read and is confusing because the original source will have had its own numbering and formatting scheme. Example material should always be retyped and assimilated to the number sequence in your own paper. Indeed, this should normally be easier than inserting scanned images into your file. It is of course still imperative that you cite the source of such quoted examples.

Finally, an issue that often arises in linguistics is dealing with special characters and symbols used in the writing systems of other languages. As a writer, it is your responsibility to figure out how to obtain and reproduce the relevant symbols whenever this is possible within reason. E.g., as a student of a course on an older stage of English, you should be able to correctly recognize and produce þ, ð and æ in your papers. These characters are important to the language

and easily available in standard word-processing and typesetting programs. The character ȝ is a bit more difficult to find in such programs, but this does not mean you can just ignore it. Your first recourse in any situation where you do not know how to produce a certain character should be to ask the instructor of your course. Usually a fairly simple solution is available. If it really turns out that there is no reasonable way to get the character you need, you should choose another symbol to represent that character, and put a note in your paper explaining what you are doing, something like this:

(4) oðet he habbe i5etted ou al þet 5e wulleð
until he has granted you all that you desire
'... until he has granted you all that you desire'[1]

I suspect that students often go to the extra trouble of copying and scanning examples from other sources as discussed above, rather than re-typing them because they are worried about getting special characters to come out right. This is not acceptable. Again, learn how to use your word-processor or ask someone to help you.

3 References

The selection and citation of sources is an extremely important part of writing a paper. Regarding the first aspect, it is crucial that you choose works which are not only relevant to you topic, but also appropriate to the kind of work you are doing. If you are not certain what kinds of sources are appropriate, it is always best to ask your instructor for advice. In general, however, you can assume that encyclopedias, general reference works and websites are **not** appropriate sources for papers at the university level. This is because they simply do not have or aspire to the level of detail and sophistication of primarily scholarly works. General reference works are for people who do not know much about the topic they are reading about and are looking for general, introductory knowledge. Scholarly works are for people who already have the introductory level knowledge and want to broaden and deepen their understanding. This most definitely includes university students at the Hauptseminar level. This does not mean that you should not consult dictionaries and encyclopedias in your preliminary work on a topic – they can indeed be very valuable as a first place to look for orientation and to clear up points of confusion. However, what you find there is not generally going to be worth reporting in a paper you write. The really interesting material is what you will find in the scholarly works that you progress to after you have understood the basics. Thus if you have a sentence in your paper along the lines of "Wikipedia/Brockhaus/Webster's New International Dictionary defines an intransitive verb as...", then you are doing something wrong.

Once you have chosen the works to refer to in your paper, it is crucial that you cite them explicitly in the proper way within what you write. This is not just a meaningless formal requirement to make things difficult for university students, it is a fundamental point of scholarship. If you examine a scholarly article from

[1] I use the character 5 in place of the older English letter yogh, which is not available in my word-processing program.

any discipline, you will notice that it follows very clear and consistent practices of citation. The specific formal details will differ from subject to subject and from journal to journal, but the basic points remain constant: you **must** explicitly indicate the source of all ideas which are not your own, in such a way that anyone with a fundamental understanding of bibliographical practice in the field will be able to locate those sources and check up on what you claim. This serves (at least) two important purposes. First, it promotes the fair attribution of work and ideas – people get credit for what they have done, and plagiarism is made more difficult. Second, it defends against misrepresentation – if you claim that John Smith says something, your readers can look up his work and check to make sure that you have correctly understood and reported Smith's ideas.

Now, the formal details of how you indicate your references are not terribly important. If you are given specific guidelines by the people you are writing the paper for, then you should follow them. Otherwise, you can use whatever format you like, as long as you keep in mind certain basic points. There should be a Bibliography or References section at the end of the paper. All of the works you used should be listed here, with complete information including author, title, publisher, year of publication, journal title and volume as relevant. In the text, whenever you discuss a work or the ideas from it or give a claim that you took from another work, indicate the source in an abbreviated form that unambiguously refers to one of the works in the Bibliography. Standard practice in linguistics is to give the last name of the author followed by the year of publication. Do not repeat the full publication information here – this only needs to appear once, in the References. If you give an actual quote from a source, you should indicate the page number in addition to the author and date. If you have multiple works by the same author published in the same year, distinguish them with lower-case letters added onto the year of publication, both in the Bibliography and in your in-text citations, like Bobaljik (2002a), Bobaljik (2002b) etc. Above all, be consistent in your formatting of things. It does not matter much whether you separate the author's name from the year of publication with a comma or with parentheses, as long as you always do it the same way throughout the paper. One common way to format things (based on the requirements for the journal *Linguistic Inquiry*) is exemplified below.

References

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