

Mini Research Paper Topics

You must choose one of these three topics for your LIN200 final paper.

1. IS THERE A UNIVERSAL DEFINITION OF 'WORD'?

A common definition for *word* goes like this: a meaningful unit that can stand by itself. For example, *dog* is a word because it has a meaning and it can stand alone as a separate unit; but the plural ending *-s* is not a word because, though it has a meaning, *-s* can only be used attached to another unit, as in *dogs*. Thus, we say *dog* is a word, but *-s* is not (it's a suffix). The trouble is, it's not all that clear what *stand alone* really means—and whether it means the same thing in different languages. For example, in Inuktitut, *qarisaujaralaakulutuqannguaq*, meaning 'an old adorable small pretend computer', is considered a word. Is there a universal definition of *word* that can be applied to all languages, or is the definition of a *word* language specific? Defend one position or the other, making reference to phonology, morphology, syntax, and language diversity (you should discuss multiple languages).

2. IS ENGLISH IN A STATE OF RUIN?

As William Labov once mused: "nobody over the age of 40 has ever gone on record as saying, 'I sure love the way kids speak these days!'" Some people believe that due to the emergence of technology and the way teenagers use language (especially slang), the English language is being ruined. Other people have argued that in fact English is not being ruined but that it is undergoing natural changes, as all languages do, in response to a changing world. Defend one position or the other, making reference to sociolinguistics, historical linguistics and the descriptive/prescriptive distinction.

3. SHOULD STUDENTS BE TAUGHT IN A BILINGUAL/BI-DIALECTAL ENVIRONMENT?

Bilingual education (i.e., teaching children in two languages) is controversial. Many educators argue that bilingual education should be limited. In some states in the U.S., teaching children in any language other than English has been severely restricted. Other educators promote bilingualism in the classroom. Bi-dialectal education is even more controversial. Some educators believe that students should be taught in the standard variety of their language while some believe that schools should be allowed to teach native speakers of a non-standard variety using that non-standard variety. Is bilingual and/or bi-dialectal education beneficial or should it be limited? Defend one position or another, making reference to language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and the standard/non-standard distinction.

INITIAL RESOURCES

To start you off on the right foot, I highly recommend the following resources. They should provide you with more context for each of the topics. Each of these articles is available on Blackboard.

Is there universal definition of 'word'?

Trask, R.L. 2004. What is a Word? *Working Papers 11*. Department of Linguistics and English Language, University of Sussex.

Robarts Library also has many book-length descriptive grammars of hundreds of languages. You may wish to consult a few.

Is English in a state of ruin?

Tagliamonte, S. A., and D. Denis. 2008. Linguistic Ruin? LOL! Instant messaging and teen language. *American Speech* 83(1): 3–34.

There are a lot of newspaper articles that discuss this topic. You might want to make use of these resources in your argumentation, but you shouldn't exclusively consult non-academic sources.

Should students be taught in a bilingual/bi-dialectal environment?

Rickford, J. R. 2002. Linguistics, education, and the Ebonics firestorm. In *Georgetown University Round Table On Languages and Linguistics 2000: Linguistics, Language, and the Professions*. J. Atlatis, H. Hamilton, and A.-H. Tan (eds). Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press. pp. 25–45.