How to choose a topic for a linguistics paper

1 The requirements for this class

The final paper will be a 10-page double-spaced essay on a topic of your choice. From the syllabus:

The final paper should take one of the following forms:

- Analysis: Identify an original puzzle. Use the skills developed in class to carefully describe the issue, and sketch a possible solution.
- Evaluation: Read a paper not discussed in class. Present the main issues raised in the paper, including the strengths and weaknesses of the analysis. Discuss further predictions, bring new data to bear on the analysis, or discuss remaining questions.
- Synthesis: Choose a phenomenon/data set not discussed in class, read two or three complementary papers, and describe the major question(s) and arguments.
- Investigation: Investigate a topic discussed in class in a foreign language, working with data from published papers or with a native speaker consultant.
- Experimentation: (Option for students with background in psycholinguistics) Choose one theory discussed in class, sketch out a prediction of the theory, and propose an experiment to test this prediction.

Meet with me to discuss possible topics, no later than week 10.
A 1-page sketch is due in Week 11.
The final week will be dedicated to short (10 minute) presentations of your final papers.

(More on how to write a paper later!)

2 Getting started

The most difficult part of finding a paper topic is getting started!

Where can you find ideas?

- Claims made in grammars or linguistics articles that you distrust or disagree with
- Suggested topics for further research at the end of research articles
- Footnotes in research articles often mentioned unsolved puzzles
- Topics in textbooks and class readings that catch your attention
- Puzzles in class handouts, in particular short undeveloped sections
- 'Hands-on' exercises in your courses
- Discussions with teacher and/or other students
- Topics you've already written or read about for other courses

- Interesting data you notice in your everyday life
- Snippets! (`http://www.ledonline.it/snippets/`)
- Squibnet (`http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jlawler/haj/Squibnet/`)
- John Lawler's English grammar FAQ (`http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jlawler/aue.html`)
- For current and recent puzzles, check out the websites for major linguistics conferences: e.g. NELS, WCCFL, GLOW for syntax and general linguistics.
- The good old fashioned way: pick up a book or journal at the library, browse until something catches your attention. Good journals for syntax include: *Linguistic Inquiry, Natural Language & Linguistic Theory, Syntax* and *Language*.

3 Once a topic begins to emerge

Once a topic begins to emerge as interesting, try and learn a bit more about it:

- Do a google (scholar) or library catalog search on some keywords relevant for your topic
- Skim the first few papers that come up in your search
- Collect a list of keywords that come up in the papers you find
- Find and read survey articles on your topic to get a general feel for what questions are being asked about it
- Repeat, until you have some idea of what your topic is generally about
- Talk to friends about your ideas
- Talk to your teacher about your research idea (email, office hours)

4 Talk to your instructor

Utilize office hours and/or email.

A constructive way to talk to your instructor:

> I want to work on topic X. I am particularly interested in phenomenon Y / I was particularly intrigued by paper Z. Is there anything that you recommend that I focus on?

If you give your instructor an idea of what interests you, they can help direct you to literature you should read or data you might want to think about.

A less constructive way to talk to your instructor:

> I don't know what to write about. What should I do?

Some instructors will just send you away to read more and come back to them with a better idea. Others might suggest a topic for you, but most likely it'll be something they care about and not necessarily something *you* care about. It's usually better if the topic comes from you, not your instructor.

5 Developing an idea

Once you have the beginnings of an idea:

- Talk to your teacher about your research idea!
- Formulate a research question (or set of research questions)
- Form a hypothesis: i.e. what do you think you will find out?
- Read secondary literature (but not forever)
- Start as early as possible with finding data and analyzing it
- Write a tentative outline
- Set deadlines for yourself

As a rule: the more precisely you have formulated your research question and your hypotheses, the easier it is to get started with the real work.

6 Possible topics for our class (but not just)

- Survey of a phenomenon from one or more points of view, going beyond what we did in class (PF deletion vs. LF copying; covert syntax vs. simpler syntax hypothesis; non-movement accounts of ACD)
- Discuss a phenomenon that may involve something "missing": could it be analyzed as a form of ellipsis?
- Careful study controversial judgments: Is there a generalization to be made about why some cases of e.g. pseudogapping are better than others?
- Critical evaluation of a paper not discussed in class: present the paper, contribute something new (e.g. problematic data, a prediction that is made by the paper and whether or not it is borne out)
- Point out new data that is problematic for an existing account we discussed in class
- Point out new data that supports an analysis we discussed in class
- First week handout mentions several types of ellipsis phenomena we will not touch on in class

Don't suffer in silence!
If you are stuck, talk to your instructor or TA.

☞ Finding a good topic is hard! It's perhaps the most difficult part of writing the paper. If you have a good, well defined topic, it's much easier to know where to go next.

7 Pitfalls to avoid

- Reading too much can be overwhelming.
- Picking a vague topic that is not narrowly defined.
  Writing a paper on "sluicing" will make it hard to find something new or interesting to say, and also to know where to start and stop. Instead, aim for something better defined, e.g. "possibilities of preposition stranding in sluicing," where you might compare how different types of prepositions behave and whether that correlates with preposition stranding in questions, as predicted by Ross (1969).
- Worrying too much.
  It is super awesome (really!) if you find novel data that poses a problem to a current account of some phenomenon. It's also great if you contribute data from a language that hasn't been studied (with regard to the relevant phenomenon) in the past, or if you are able to provide a new description/generalization of difficult judgments from the literature. That said, undergraduate papers don't have to innovate. You could write a critical summary of a theory, perhaps contrasting it with an opposing approach from the literature. Data that is problematic for a certain account of a phenomenon can be found in other relevant papers, it doesn't have to be discovered by you.
- Waiting until the last minute...
- Suffering in silence.
  Did I mention that you could talk to your TA and/or instructor?