

Report of Examiners

MPhil and MSt in General Linguistics and Comparative Philology, 2011

1. Examination Arrangements

There were 9 MSt and 13 MPhil candidates. The final examiners' meeting was held on 5 July 2010. One of the candidates was given special permission to sit the examinations in College, a second to take eye-drops into the examination room, and a third to use a word processor and benefit from extra time of 5 minutes per hour (for resting or typing more slowly).

Examiners

Prof. Andreas Willi (Worcester College) (Chairman)
Dr Jan Fellerer (Wolfson College)
Dr Rosalind Temple (New College)
Dr Adam Ledgeway (University of Cambridge, External)

Assessors

Dr Márta Abrusán (Somerville)
Dr Ash Asudeh (Jesus)
Dr Brian Ball (St Anne's)
Dr Peter Barber (Wolfson)
Dr Jim Benson (Wolfson)
Prof. Deborah Cameron (Worcester)
Prof. John Coleman (Wolfson)
Dr Juan Carlos Conde (Magdalen)
Prof. Mary Dalrymple (Linacre)
Prof. Bjarke Frellesvig (Oriental Institute)
Dr Paloma García-Bellido (St Cross)
Dr Kerstin Hoge (St Hilda's)
Dr Simon Horobin (Magdalen)
Dr Jieun Kiaer (Oriental Institute)
Prof. Aditi Lahiri (Somerville)
Dr Anastassia Loukina (St Cross)
Prof. Marc Lauxtermann (Exeter)
Prof. Peter Mackridge (St Cross)
Prof. Martin Maiden (Trinity)
Dr Louise Mycock (Centre for Linguistics)
Dr Elinor Payne (St Hilda's)
Dr Philomen Probert (Wolfson)
Prof. Stephen Pulman (Somerville)
Mr J. C. Smith (St Catherine's)
Dr Robert Vanderplank (Language Centre)
Dr Ian Watson (Christ Church)
Dr Ilya Yakubovich (Wolfson)

Papers

Paper	MPhil/MSt
Paper A: Linguistic Theory	13/9
B(i) Phonetics and Phonology	1/1
B(ii) Syntax (essay)	7/6
B(iii) Semantics	3/0
B(iv) Historical and Comparative Linguistics	2/1
B(vi) History and Structure of English	2/1
B(vi) History and Structure of Modern Greek	1/0
B(vi) History and Structure of Japanese	1/0
B(vii) Experimental Phonetics	2/0
B(viii) Sociolinguistics	3/3
B(ix) Computational Linguistics	2/0
B(x) Historical Grammar of Indo-Iranian	0/1
B(x) History of Ancient Greek	1/1
B(x) Morpho-Phonology	2/0
B(x) Philosophy of Language	3/0
B(x) Pragmatics	4/0
B(x) Psycholinguistics	1/0
D(i) History of Latin	1/0
D(ii) Structure of Latin	1/0
D(i) History of Sanskrit	1/0
D(ii) Structure of Sanskrit	1/0
D(iii) Translation/commentary on texts in Sanskrit	1/0
D(i) History of Spanish	0/1

Theses

1. MPhil

Impersonal constructions in Spanish: An LFG approach based on gradience
Language choice as a marker of identity amongst Sami semi-speakers
The classification of nominal compounds in the interpretation of Panini's Astadhyayi
Pragmatic impairments: evidence from schizophrenic speech
Modification as a propositional act function: the role of the adverb category
Boundaries between Standard Modern Greek and Cypriot Greek as perceived by native speakers
Recent loanwords in contemporary Japanese: an empirical study of loan verbs from English
Adverbs and conceptual semantics
An investigation of redundancy in Mandarin tone
An LFG approach to Old English constituent order
A lexical-functional analysis of Swahili relative clauses
The effects of cognitive load on language production: a case study of aviation communication
Usage of contracted and uncontracted perfect forms in Cicero's <i>Philippics</i> and <i>Epistulae ad Atticum</i>

The standard of the MPhil theses was very good, overall, with seven out of the thirteen obtaining a mark in the distinction range (and all of these also ending up above the old

distinction threshold of 76). Two of the MPhil theses failed. Both of these were deemed irredeemable by a viva, and one of them was, moreover, submitted three weeks late; in this case, the Proctors gave retrospective permission for late submission to the candidate, while allowing the Examiners to impose an academic penalty. The College of the candidate concerned requested that no such penalty be imposed, and the matter was discussed in detail among the Examiners; it was felt, in the end, that there was not sufficient mitigating evidence in order not to impose a substantial penalty without unduly disadvantaging all the other candidates. Taking into account the special history of the case, however, it was decided that, despite the seriousness of the delay, the mark should be reduced only by 5 (and not the maximum of 10) percentage points—a decision which did not crucially affect the candidate's performance anyway since the thesis had been marked as a fail to begin with, and of the four exam papers taken by the same candidate only one (narrowly) reached pass level.

2. MSt (optional)

Mandarin utterance final particle <i>a-</i> : a prosodic analysis

The syntax of direct quotation

One of the two MSt theses obtained a high distinction-level mark, while the other was a simple pass.

2. Results

All MSt candidates and 11 out of 13 MPhil candidates passed. One MPhil candidate was offered a choice between resitting the exam in a year's time or being awarded an MSt degree instead. The results of one other MPhil candidate were so unsatisfactory that the exam regulations did not even allow for a viva to take place, nor could an MSt degree be offered instead of the MPhil. (The same candidate was apparently taken ill in the last examination session, but their performance had been substantially insufficient also in the papers sat before: cf. above). 6 MSt candidates and 7 MPhil candidates were awarded a distinction. The George Wolf Prize in Linguistics and Philology was awarded to the best MPhil candidate, who had achieved a comfortable distinction in all of his papers as well as the thesis and amply deserved some form of special recognition.

Marking was fairly unproblematic; as in previous years, markers were provided with mark sheets for dissertations and papers. The external examiner looked at all the scripts and gave a third opinion on a few of them, but this never substantially diverged from those of the first and second markers. None of the candidates was viva'd.

3. Recommendations and general remarks

A (relatively) minor issue arose with respect to Paper A 'Linguistic Theory'. Contrary to what the candidates had been told ahead of the exam, and due to an oversight, the Morphology section did not contain a data question. Two candidates notified the Chairman of Examiners of this, pointing out that the omission might have affected their performance. In the event, however, both achieved their highest overall mark on Paper A (both at distinction level), so that no additional adjustments seemed called for; also, more generally, marks given to questions in the Morphology section showed a normal distribution for all candidates.

Distinctions (cf. above) were awarded according to the criteria communicated to candidates (MSt: two marks above 70, MPhil: thesis and two further marks above 70). Like last year, the number of MPhil distinctions thus awarded was noticeably higher than before the distinction level had been lowered by divisional ruling (MPhil: 54%). Of the 7 MPhil candidates who were awarded a distinction, 2 would not have obtained a distinction if the previous distinction level had still been in force (but the 38% reached in this way would still have substantially exceeded the approximate average of 25% in earlier years). The Faculty might wish to reconsider the rules: for example, if the requirement of an MPhil distinction were to obtain 70 or above on the thesis and *three* further marks, only 3 MPhil candidates would have achieved a distinction (23%). It has to be borne in mind, however, that the rules for an MSt distinction can hardly be tightened, so that an unfair disparity might result where an MSt distinction is obtained relatively easily, whereas an MPhil distinction is out of reach for any but the most gifted candidates.

One of the assessors raised a somewhat related point. According to the descriptors, an MSt candidate will be awarded a distinction-level mark already when his/her work shows nothing but “a competent survey of received ideas”; is this appropriate, or should the descriptors be revised (or abolished)? A more general question follows from this: Should MPhil and MSt scripts continue to be marked to different standards? Or does the fact that MSt candidates offer only three papers discriminate sufficiently, so that quality standards in these fewer papers could actually be the same as for MPhil candidates?

Apart from these Faculty-internal matters, another area of concern has been identified this year. Currently, candidates inform the Faculty Board of their option choices, and the Faculty Board approves these (or not). However, candidates then submit their examination-entry form through their College rather than the Faculty. This may make sense for undergraduate students, but it is problematic at the graduate level because a situation may arise in which a candidate submits, by mistake or otherwise, an entry form which does not correspond exactly to what the Faculty Board has approved. This happened in two cases this year, and when the Chairman of Examiners contacted Schools about these mismatches, he was told that no amendments were possible. As it is, the situation was rectified by the Chairman contacting the candidates directly and telling them of the ‘correct’ (i.e. Faculty Board-approved) name/version of their option choices and their implications for the format of the respective exam papers. In one of the two cases, however, the upshot was that an identical exam paper had to be set under two different (and both slightly incorrect) titles because Schools refused to correct the record as such (suggesting instead that two different papers be set—although the candidates had been taught the same things!). As often, the blind copying of undergraduate procedures onto a graduate course proves inadequate here.

Finally, we should like to highlight how problematic it is from the Examiners’ point of view when OUCS discontinue postgraduate students’ Oxford e-mail addresses by 30 June, i.e. before the examination process has even been completed. This makes perfectly legitimate exam-related communication (e.g. regarding the scheduling of any vivas) virtually impossible and is unnecessarily discourteous towards people who have enriched—both literally and metaphorically—the University’s life for the duration of their course.

Prof. A. J. Willi (Chair)
Dr J. Fellerer
Dr R. Temple
Dr A. Ledgeway (External)

5 July 2011