

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

FACULTY OF MODERN AND MEDIEVAL LANGUAGES

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The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford  
C/o Mrs Sally Powell, Assistant Registrar  
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**External Examiner's Report for MPhil and MSt in General Linguistics and  
Comparative Philology, 2011**

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

This is my second year in the role of external examiner for the MPhil and MSt in General Linguistics and Comparative Philology for the Faculty of Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics. I was responsible for looking at all examination papers and theses for candidates entered for the MPhil and the MSt degrees (MPhil: 13 candidates; MSt: 9 candidates). I am happy to confirm that the papers were set at an appropriate level and they were of a comparable standard to those that are set by the other institutions with which I am familiar (including the University of Cambridge where I have taught and examined the MPhil in Linguistics for fifteen years).

I greatly appreciated the efficiency with which the examination process was organised at Oxford throughout the academic year, and in particular during the examination period itself. I was advised at the very beginning of the academic year as to the dates when I would need to be available; I was told when I would need to look at the papers that were set and when I needed to be in Oxford to look at the scripts and theses. During the marking process, I was alerted to specific cases that needed my judgment and I was able to look at the whole range of scripts for the MPhil and the MSt. The final examination board, chaired by Professor Andreas Willi, which I attended on 5 July was efficiently organised and rigorously fair in accordance with the regulations and guidance to examiners.

Although I sampled all available scripts and theses, much of my reading was devoted to problematic borderline or potential fail cases, both at individual paper level and in terms of overall individual student profile (in particular, candidates 834216, 751047, 542463 and 203662). I found such an approach particularly helpful, since it allows the external to deal with

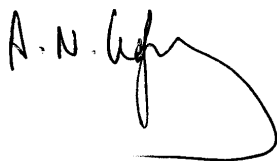
runs of marks for an individual student in borderline cases, and to see student performance in its entirety in a way that permits finer discrimination of intellectual quality to be made. All cases in which I was called upon to adjudicate confirmed to me that the marking was internally consistent and rigorous, and that descriptors relating to eventual marks were clearly used.

On the whole, I have been extremely impressed by the range and quality of the work that graduate students in General Linguistics and Comparative Philology at Oxford produce. In the written papers and theses students are variously required to show a broad and expert knowledge of general linguistic theory and/or its application to individual languages or language families; in almost all the papers and theses that I read students revealed an impressive level of engagement with a wide range of complex topics to produce work that demonstrated evidence of a high level of (cross)linguistic competence, independent enquiry, research skills and, in many cases, highly sophisticated writing. Indeed, the research presented in several of the theses was of such a high standard that I have no doubt that it could be published with only minimal revision. This level of performance provides a clear indication of the very high quality of teaching and supervision at Oxford and speaks well for the design of the curriculum, while the linking of in-depth study of individual languages and/or language families is a notable strength of the Faculty.

The spread of results for both the MPhil and the MSt was entirely appropriate, with all MSt candidates and 11 of the 13 MPhil candidates passing. In the two remaining MPhil cases, one candidate was offered the choice of being awarded an MSt or retaking the examinations next year, while the other candidate failed outright (s/he had such consistently low marks in all parts of the examination that the regulations made it impossible to offer him/her a viva examination or an MSt degree in place of the MPhil). Of the 9/11 candidates (MSt/MPhil) that passed, 6 MSt candidates and 7 MPhil candidates were awarded a distinction. Although I witnessed no evidence of grade inflation and have no doubt that the marks of distinction were entirely deserved in every case, I do believe that the current threshold of a mark of 70 or above is set far too low for the award of distinction, especially in view of the fact that examiners may award marks of 83 and above. Indeed, the marking criteria for both the MPhil and the MSt recognise 3 distinct numerical categories within the class of 'distinction' (namely, 70-75; 76-83; and greater than 83). Surely, if the award of a 'distinction' is intended to recognize outstanding performance in the most able students, then it ought to make reference to the highest ranges of the 3 numerical categories currently recognized within the distinction category. I strongly recommend therefore that the current threshold be raised (e.g., for the MPhil a mark of 75 or higher in the thesis and a mark of 70 or higher in all remaining papers; for the MSt a mark of 75 or higher in one of the papers and a mark of 70 or higher in all remaining papers).

I would like to thank again, and to signal the efficiency and courtesy of, the Faculty of Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics and, in particular, Kate Dobson, secretary of the Centre for Linguistics and Philology, and Professor Andres Willi, Chair of Examiners.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. N. Ledgeway', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Adam Ledgeway