Ph.D. Program in Linguistics: Assessment of the Third Exam

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Program Learning Goals:

The goal of the Graduate Program in Linguistics is to train students for careers in research and teaching in the areas of linguistic analysis and cognition of language. Upon successful completion of the Program, students must demonstrate in-depth knowledge of at least one core area of linguistics centered in Phonology or Phonetics; Morphology; Syntax; Semantics and the ability to perform advanced linguistic analyses, based in current theoretical models in one of these areas. In addition they must show ability to conduct theory-based empirical studies of any human language and/or ability to apply core area knowledge in an ancillary subfield such as language acquisition, language processing, computational linguistics and sociolinguistics. Students must be able to conceptualize and design research projects and, in the case of experimental and large-scale data analysis studies, demonstrate mastery of a range of methods and analytical procedures. They should demonstrate the ability to construct linguistic arguments in line with scientific principles of hypothesis testing, present original research to an audience at professional conferences and write research papers for submission to peer-reviewed journals.

Learning Goals assessed by the Third Exam

The Third Exam or Dissertation Defense demonstrates the ability to conduct research and write original scholarly work in an area of linguistics selected by the student. This may include theoretical, experimental or descriptive work. Prior to the Third Exam, students must have submitted and/or presented original research to professional venues such as conferences and colloquia. A Dissertation Committee of three faculty members in Linguistics is selected by the student. This Committee is responsible for providing guidance in the process of conducting research for and writing of the dissertation. The Committee approves the suitability of the student’s dissertation for the Final Examination (oral defense) and acts as the Examining Committee.

The Third Exam consists of the following:

- Submission of the dissertation draft three weeks prior to oral defense date
- Oral presentation and defense of dissertation
- Evaluation of the dissertation by the Committee
Assessment Procedure

The Program conducted a survey of dissertations defended in the past 10 years, to determine

a) time to degree (TTD), funded vs. unfunded,
b) number of semesters between second exam and third exam, and
c) placement after defense.

Results

a) TTD: There were a total of 57 dissertations defended between 2005 and 2015, with an average TTD of 9.7 years. A total of 7 dissertations (12%) were fully funded: 5 with an ECF, 1 with a GCF and 1 with a Magnet. All but 1 had a shorter TTD than the average, ranging between 5 and 9 years. The one dissertator that had a longer TTD (10 years) started a family after the second exam and moved away from the area.

b) Average number of semesters between 2nd and 3rd exam was 8. This is longer than average number of semesters between 1st and 2nd exam (5).

c) Placement: 46/57 (81%) are currently holding an academic position in linguistics or a language-related field. Of these, 26 (45%) are in tenure-track or tenured positions, 10 (17%) are in adjunct positions, 4 (7%) in post-doc positions, 2 (3%) in visiting positions and 4 (7%) in research positions at private companies. 11 (19%) are working in areas unrelated to linguistics and language.

Analysis

Considering that the vast majority of the dissertations considered in this survey were unfunded (88%), the Program deems the length of TTD rather unsurprising. We expect that in the next round of assessments, TTD will be shorter, since a larger proportion of dissertators will have been funded through GTFs, ECFs and GCFs. An in-depth investigation of the reasons for the longer time lag between 2nd and 3rd exams will be launched in the Fall, but a preliminary look at the data reveals that students who move away from the NYC area after the second exam and/or fulfillment of course requirements contribute significantly to longer TTD. As a result, the Program will reconsider mentoring strategies that might help retain student presence and involvement in the Program even after the 2nd exam.

The placement data were considered to be quite satisfactory, since the vast majority of graduates surveyed hold academic positions (81%). The relatively high number of graduates in adjunct positions could be due to a general reticence to leave New York and the East Coast for more prestigious tenure-track positions in other parts of the country.