The dissertation experience

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Outline

1. Regulations
2. Timeline
3. Tips and good practice
4. Any questions?

Regulations

Word limit

- Normally 8,000 words; some programmes 10,000 words.
- What counts:
  - Main text, footnotes, part headings, captions, figures / words in tables / diagrams.
- What doesn't count:
  - Title page, abstract, acknowledgements, ToC, appendices, bibliography.

Submission

- Deadline: Thursday 17th August, 4pm.
- Electronically via Learn, and
- Two printed and stapled copies (bound if you like, but not necessary).
- 11–12pt body text, 1.5 line spacing.

What you can expect from your supervisor

- Face-to-face meetings
- Responses to email queries
- Reading drafts.

- NB: Every supervisor has their own style, and it is very wise to agree a few ground rules early on.
  - How often to meet?
  - Timeline for progress of research
  - Etc.
- Your handbook states that:
  - It is not normal for there to be more than 10 hours of supervision.
  - Supervisors must be given a minimum of a week to provide comments.

  In practice, each of these also vary widely, partly as a function of number of supervisees.

What you can expect from your supervisor

> The supervisor is like the mother bird, who has to stay in the nest and can squawk a warning if she sights danger. She would like to fly alongside her fledgling, as she has always done in the past, as that would be more comfortable and safer; but she would be failing in her duty, by not letting the fledging learn to fly on its own.
>
> (John Joseph)

Timeline

By now

- Attend courses

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- Get to know the academic staff

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- *Think*

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- ▶ Get to know the academic staff
- ▶ *Think*
  - ▶ Which topics have really grabbed me?

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- *Think*
  - Which topics have really grabbed me?
  - Is there anything I want to contribute to?
  - Anything I want to try to improve?

By now

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- ▶ Get to know the academic staff
- ▶ *Think*
  - ▶ Which topics have really grabbed me?
  - ▶ Is there anything I want to contribute to?
  - ▶ Anything I want to try to improve?
  - ▶ Who do I want to work with?

By now

- ▶ Attend courses
- ▶ Get to know the academic staff
- ▶ *Think*
    - ▶ Which topics have really grabbed me?
    - ▶ Is there anything I want to contribute to?
    - ▶ Anything I want to try to improve?
    - ▶ Who do I want to work with?
    - ▶ What methodologies do I enjoy working with?

By now

- ▶ Attend courses
- ▶ Get to know the academic staff
- ▶ *Think*
  - ▶ Which topics have really grabbed me?
  - ▶ Is there anything I want to contribute to?
  - ▶ Anything I want to try to improve?
  - ▶ Who do I want to work with?
  - ▶ What methodologies do I enjoy working with?
- ▶ Approach potential supervisors

By now

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- ▶ Get to know the academic staff
- ▶ *Think*
  - ▶ Which topics have really grabbed me?
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  - ▶ What methodologies do I enjoy working with?
- ▶ Approach potential supervisors
- ▶ Settle on broad research area

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- Get to know the academic staff
- *Think*
    - Which topics have really grabbed me?
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    - Who do I want to work with?
    - What methodologies do I enjoy working with?
- Approach potential supervisors
- Settle on broad research area
- Settle on supervision team

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- *Think*
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- Approach potential supervisors
- Settle on broad research area
- Settle on supervision team
- (Settle on specific research question)

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  - Who do I want to work with?
  - What methodologies do I enjoy working with?
- Approach potential supervisors
- Settle on broad research area
- Settle on supervision team
- (Settle on specific research question)
- (Design and conduct first bits of research)

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- Approx. late June: writing in earnest.

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- Early August: revise

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- Asap: Design and conduct first bits of research
- Approx. late June: writing in earnest.
- Approx. mid-July: have a full draft.
- Early August: revise
- August 17: submit!

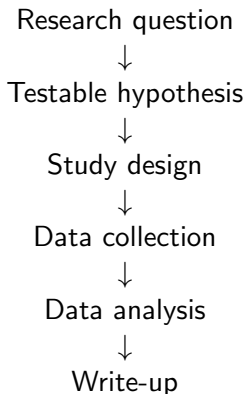# After submission

- Two markers independently read your dissertation.
- They agree a grade, and summary feedback.
- Dissertations are sent to the external examiner.
- Dissertation grades and overall degree classes are ratified at the final exam board (October).
- You graduate with flying colours (December?).

Tips and good practice

Progress

▶ *All* linguistic research (with very few exceptions) follows the following path, or a slight variation thereon.

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Research question
↓
Testable hypothesis
↓
Study design
↓
Data collection
↓
Data analysis
↓
Write-up

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▶ If you are not already following this path, you probably should.

▶ But there are different approaches to each of these steps.

Finding a research question

- If you're very lucky, a well-formed question will fall out of the sky and land in your brain.
- That doesn't happen very often.
- It's more likely that you will have a few vague notions about what kind of topic to address.
- And that's fine.
- Even an approximate topic can suggest:
    - Potential supervisors;
    - Potential reading;
    - Potential methodologies.

From approximate topic to precise question

- Supervisors may have topics they've been waiting to give to someone, or the two keywords you mention may spark something.
  - There's absolutely no shame in taking up a question suggested by a supervisor – so long as you can live with it for the next few months.
- Supervisors should be able to recommend literature to get you started.
- Use the usual resources to broaden your review.
- Expect the process of reading $\rightarrow$ question formation $\rightarrow$ more reading to go through a few iterations.
- You're looking for something that isn't already fully understood, but is tractable.
  - You only have a few months.
  - You only have 8,000 words.
  - You can't solve everything.

Work

- ▶ This is as good a time as any to mention this.
- ▶ Your first semester courses earn you 60 credits over four months.
- ▶ Your second semester courses earn you 60 credits over four months.
- ▶ Your dissertation earns you 60 credits, and the bulk of your dissertation research is spread over four months.
- ▶ You are not on holiday right now.
- ▶ You can't get away with equations like the following.
  - ▶ 'I wrote my 4,000-word essay for *Current Issues in X* in 10 days. It got a good grade.'
  - ▶ '$8000/4000 = 2$.'
  - ▶ 'So I need to leave $2 \times 10 = 20$ days for my dissertation.'
- ▶ Let's say that you can read *and understand* 5 pages per hour.
- ▶ Let's say there are 25 pages in an article.
- ▶ Then if you're reviewing literature in an area, it's entirely reasonable to expect you to digest 7 articles in a week.

From question to hypothesis

- In some areas of linguistics, you follow standard experimental procedures to the letter.
- In others, you don't.
- Regardless, it's very useful to think of your dissertation research in terms of not just a question, but a specific, testable hypothesis.
- This brings focus and clarity to your research and writing.
- It helps to link your empirical work to the big picture.
- A good hypothesis generates predictions, and predictions can be tested.
- You might want the hypothesis to crash and burn — falsification of a hypothesis is progress.

Recent examples

Research question
Do similar structures in neighbouring languages have to reflect borrowing?

Testable hypothesis
Medieval French *lequel* and Middle English *the which* were used in the same structural contexts.

Implied methodology
Corpus study of parallel Medieval French and Middle English texts

Desired outcome
Hypothesis fails

Recent examples

Research questions

What's special about the English spoken in Shetland?
Where does Shetland English fit in the syntactic typology of
Germanic languages?

Testable hypothesis

Questions in Shetland English allow inversion of subject and main
verb

Implied methodologies

Structured sociolinguistic interviews
Review of 20th-century dialect literature

Desired outcomes

High ratings of questions with inversion
Possible effects of age and region

Study design, data collection, data analysis

- ▶ Little general advice here. You may be conducting:
  - ▶ A corpus or other textual study
  - ▶ An experimental study
  - ▶ A sociolinguistic study
  - ▶ A simulation
  - ▶ A study based on introspective judgements
  - ▶ Etc.

  Each of these paradigms comes with its own best practice. Your supervisor should be able to advise.

- ▶ Your study should address your hypothesis, which should inform your research question. Moving backwards and forwards between concrete empirical results and the big picture is part of the skill of making your research interesting (to yourself and others).

- ▶ Even a syntactician or morphologist asking themselves 'Can I say *horribler* or *This is what eating upsets me*?' is running a very basic experiment — same considerations apply.

Study design, data collection, data analysis

- ▶ You may occasionally develop a new analysis of well-known data. This is unusual, but does happen.

- ▶ Assenting to another syntactician (etc.)'s judgement amounts to replicating their experiment. Dissenting indicates a failure to replicate. Both are normal.

- ▶ No logical reason to stick to one study, but time and space constraints often force this.

- ▶ Partly because of this, piloting is strongly encouraged where possible.

- ▶ Practicalities (1): *ethics*. Don't forget, if your research involves human subjects.

- ▶ Practicalities (2): Some amount of funding is available for participant fees, etc. Consult your programme director if this would be useful.

Write-up

- ▶ The path from research question to data analysis also provides a good first-pass structure for a dissertation (with intro and conclusion).
- ▶ Suddenly, 8,000 words doesn't seem so big.
- ▶ Remember, you are writing for an average reader, not your supervisor.
- ▶ Try not to lose sight of the structure, and make sure to help your reader navigate through the structure (draw out links between sections, etc.).
- ▶ Stylistic norms vary between subdisciplines. If in doubt, consult your supervisor, or use recent articles in major relevant journals as a model.
- ▶ General writing advice is available at http://students.ppls.ed.ac.uk/study-skills/ linguistics-and-english-language/essay-writing/. If you have had *any* trouble in coursework with writing style, seek advice sooner rather than later.

Write-up
Comments and redraft

- ▶ Many supervisors will be willing, or even expect, to comment on a draft prior to submission (discuss this in advance with your supervisor).
- ▶ If this applies to you, think about timing.
  - ▶ Thoroughly commenting on 8,000 words can take over a day.
  - ▶ We all have other commitments, every day.
  - ▶ Some of us are supervising > 10 MSc dissertations simultaneously.
  - ▶ So you may have to wait a couple of weeks for comments.
  - ▶ There can be hundreds of comments, so you need a couple of weeks to work through them.

  So having a first draft ready a month before submission is just about enough.
- ▶ Try to make your first draft as good as you can. Otherwise the 'added-value' comments from your supervisor (things that you may never have spotted, which can elevate a dissertation) may get lost among the things you could have spotted yourself.

Any questions?