

Term Papers and Theses in Linguistics: Guidelines and Recommendations*

Prof. Dr. Mingya Liu
Empirical English Linguistics
Department of English and American Studies
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Version 05.2024



Abstract

These guidelines offer a concise yet thorough resource tailored to students preparing linguistics term papers and theses. Emphasising the formal aspects of scholarly writing, they meticulously cover facets such as the presentation of evidence, adherence to proper citation practices, and the maintenance of a consistent writing style. Within the content section, students receive guidance on defining research topics, formulating precise questions, and ensuring cohesive paper organisation. The document also outlines practical steps for both term papers and theses, including essential deadlines and a streamlined inquiry process. With a dedicated focus on clarity and strict adherence to guidelines, these recommendations strive to enhance the overall quality of students' academic writing.

For continuous improvement of this document, comments are more than welcome!

*We would like to thank Johanna David for her help with creating this document. We thank both her and Nic Neustädt for sharing their experience with writing their BA theses.

Important note

Compose your term paper or thesis in accordance with the specifications of your study programme in the examination regulations (Prüfungsordnung) and the conventions of the subject area. In the following, we offer guidelines and recommendations for term papers or theses in linguistics.

1 Formal aspects

Consistency is crucial in academic writing, so it is important to maintain uniform formatting. Please adhere to the following formal requirements.

1.1 General formatting

- margins: 2.5 cm on all sides
- font and font size: Times New Roman (12 pt.), Arial (11 pt.), Calibri (11 pt.)
- font size in footnotes: 10 pt.
- line spacing: 1.5 for the main text, 1.0 for footnotes
- alignment: justified (Blocksatz)

1.2 Title page

Every term paper or thesis should include a title page with the following details:

- university and institute name
- seminar title and semester
- instructor's name
- title and subtitle of the paper
- author's name, address, and email
- student ID (Matrikelnummer)
- submission date

1.3 Table of contents

Each bachelor's or master's thesis should have a table of contents, listing the section headings with page numbers (e.g., 1, 1.1, 1.2, etc.); a table of contents is optional for a term paper. Page numbering starts with the first text page.

It is, moreover, important to note that the discovery of plagiarism in an academic paper will result in a negative evaluation. You also need to include a declaration of authenticity 'Eidesstaatliche Erklärung' when handing in your paper, see this template.

2 Content

2.1 Research topics, questions, methods

Creating a **research question** is a critical first step in your term paper or thesis. Follow these steps:

1. Review literature: Start with a thorough review of existing literature in your field of interest. A seminar in higher modules provides an ideal opportunity to gain an overview of the literature on a specific topic or research area, and thus, can be used for term papers and as inspirations for finding a thesis topic.
2. Identify gaps or puzzles: Find unanswered questions in the literature for your research question. As linguists work with data, these questions can target old data that are still under debate or new data that are puzzling. Note: We do not expect undergraduate or graduate students to fully address research gaps or puzzles at this stage. Rather, the goal is to systematically present and discuss these issues based on the literature.
3. Focused question: Narrow down your research focus to 1-2 precise and focused research questions. If you are unsure about which question to choose, feel free to seek guidance during your instructor/supervisor's office hours.

Thesis example 1: Johanna's BA thesis

"In my BA thesis (David 2022), I conducted a theoretical examination of multiple modals in Jamaican Creole (e.g., *mait(a) kyan* 'may/might can'). I established my theoretical framework by drawing on semantic work and concepts related to language contact. I explored the general features of Jamaican Creole modals and delved into the function of multiple modals. Additionally, I analysed modals in source languages, which included varieties of English and Kwa languages, with a focus on select semantic features and clausal structures in multiple modal constructions. In the conclusion, I consolidated my findings and highlighted areas for further research within this context. In essence, my thesis is theoretical rather than corpus-based or experimental, involving a survey of pertinent linguistic research."

Thesis example 2: Nic's BA thesis

“In my BA thesis (Neustädt 2023), I conducted a corpus study on Double Modals (DMs, e.g. *He might could do it.*) in contemporary English. The research involved analyzing instances of DMs in a large collection of written and spoken texts to explore their frequency, usage patterns, and syntactic structures. I examined the unique linguistic features of DMs in English and discussed their roles within different contexts by drawing on existing linguistic frameworks and theories related to modality. The corpus-based approach allowed me to do a comprehensive investigation of real-world language usage, providing insights into the variation and distribution of DMs. The conclusion consolidates the results and suggests potential avenues for further research in the realm of English modality.”

Decide what **types of methods** you would like to use to examine your research question. In the context of term papers, your method will most likely be theoretical, i.e. a survey of an area or phenomenon using linguistic theory; with BA and MA/MEd theses, you can choose between a survey of linguistic theory, a corpus-based or experimental study and other options. Make sure to consider how much time your chosen methods will take and assess whether it is a feasible endeavour with your instructor/supervisor.

2.2 Structure

Your thesis/term paper should consist of the following parts:

- introduction
 - highlights the relevance to the linguistic research field
 - derives the research question logically
 - provides a roadmap of the paper
- theoretical background
 - clearly describes theoretical notions relevant to the topic
 - formulates the research question and hypothesis precisely, derived from existing research and theory
- main content
 - describes linguistic methods (e.g. experimental, theoretical) applied to the topic

- applies chosen methods appropriately to analyse the research question
- reports the main findings (i.e. those relevant for the research question) and possible secondary findings

- general discussion

- interprets main results in relation to the research question (confirms/rejects the hypothesis)
- discusses secondary findings
- identifies the limitations and scope of the study

- conclusion

- draws conclusions and integrates them back into the theoretical framework

The C-C-C (Context-Content-Conclusion) rule offers valuable guidance for structuring your paper at every level, from paragraphs or sections to chapters and even the entire document, see the work of Mensh and Kording (2017) for details.

2.3 Citations

First and foremost, avoid predatory publications: use the scientific literature from the courses you have taken, and what the lecturers recommended. Regarding the use of internet sources, it should be noted that pages without identifiable authors, such as Wikipedia etc., must be strictly avoided. Typically, there are enough scientifically recognised and verified publications available on a given topic. Check with the lecturers and supervisors if you are unsure.

In linguistics, we typically employ the American or online citation style, which involves placing the source reference directly after a quotation or evidence. Unlike other fields, we do not use footnotes or citation styles like MLA (English Language & Literature). Instead, linguists use citation styles such as APA (American Psychological Association), for which instructions are provided in the following sections.¹

2.3.1 Direct quotation

If you use verbatim quotes containing 3 or more words, you have to indicate this as follows:

Citation example 1: direct quotation

A creole is “a restructured variety of its lexifier” (Mufwene 2001: 28).

¹There are alternative citation styles such as the Generic Style Rules for Linguistics of the MPI for Evolutionary Anthropology, or the Unified Style Sheet for Linguistics Journals of the Linguistic Society of America. Both documents contain guidelines for citation as well as formatting.

Note: Longer verbatim quotations (more than three lines) are set apart from the main text (indentation, smaller font size). Avoid using too many direct quotations; aim for paraphrasing in your own words as often as possible!

2.3.2 Providing evidence

You have to indicate publication(s) and sometimes also page number(s) when you paraphrase information taken from a reliable source (see section 2.3 for how to identify reliable sources).

Strictly avoid expressions such as “some researchers hold that...” without specifying where you found that piece of information!

Citation example 2: providing evidence

An essential factor distinguishing between the minds of humans and other animals lies in “our uniquely human ability to ‘bootstrap’.” (Carey 2004: 59).

Additionally, ensure the consistent numbering of your linguistic examples and provide a precise source for each. If you undertake translations or make any modifications, indicate this in a footnote.

2.3.3 How to structure your references list

In the context of academic writing, it is crucial to correctly compile your bibliography. As part of this process, you are required to alphabetically arrange it based on the family names of authors/editors, and present it as demonstrated below. This task can be demanding, but it is fundamental for upholding academic integrity and ensuring transparency. Refer to the table below for examples.

As HU students, you have access to helpful programmes such as Citavi, which can assist you in this task and ensure the accuracy in the bibliography.

2.3.4 Glossing conventions

When it comes to glossing conventions in English-language papers, you have to accurately present linguistic examples from varieties of English or other languages including German. Ensure there is adequate spacing between individual words so that readers can easily match glosses with specific words or morphemes. Use standard abbreviations such as ‘3SG’ for third-person singular or ‘MOD’ for modal. To format these abbreviations correctly (in Word), press CTRL+D and select the ‘small caps’ or ‘Kapitälchen’ option. The key here is to maintain consistency in your usage of abbreviations throughout your paper and avoid switch-

²Prepare your term paper or thesis using software such as Word or a similar tool, and submit the final document in PDF format. Alternatively, if you prefer LaTeX, contact me for access to templates at mingya.liu@hu-berlin.de.

ing between different ones. Please refer to the Leipzig Glossing Rules for details.

Glossing examples

- (1) þæt he scolde beieton him
 COMP he.NOM should obtain him.DAT
 þone mynstre of
 DET.ACC monastery.ACC of
 Burch.
 peterborough
 ‘That he should obtain for him the
 monastery of Peterborough.’
 (Old English, De Bastiani and Hinter-
 holzl 2020: 2)
- (2) An gen Bier yiyang gao.
 Ann as Bill same tall
 ‘Ann is as tall as Bill.’
 (Mandarin Chinese, Sun 2022: 3)

3 Practical information: timeline and steps

General remark: Make sure to consult your **Prüfungsordnung**. If you would like to write either a term paper or a thesis under my supervision, it is recommended to follow these guidelines.²

3.1 Term papers

If you are taking a course with me and consider writing a term paper on a related topic, I kindly recommend the following timeline:

Winter term:

- express your interest in writing a term paper with me by mid-December
- schedule a meeting by the end of January so that we can talk about specifics

Summer term:

- express your interest by late May
- schedule a meeting by the end of June

These meetings aim to align our understanding of your research interests and offer guidance if needed.

| type of source | example |
|---|---|
| monographs | Chomsky, N. (1965). <i>Aspects of the Theory of Syntax</i> . Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. |
| edited volumns/collections | Csipak, E., Eckardt, R., Liu, M. and Sailer, M. (Eds.) (2013). <i>Beyond ‘Any’ and ‘Ever’: New Explorations in Negative Polarity Sensitivity</i> . Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. |
| journal articles | Smith, J. (2002). Negative concord in the old and new world: evidence from Scotland. <i>Language Variation and Change</i> , 13(2), 109-134. |
| chapters in edited volumes/collections | Ameka, F. K. & Kropp Dakubu, M. E. (2008). Introduction. In Ameka, F. K. & Kropp Dakubu, M. E. (Eds.). <i>Aspect and Modality in Kwa Languages</i> . Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1-8. |
| online publications (e.g., corpora, tools of data analysis) | Leipzig Corpora Collection (2008). English newspaper corpus based on material from 2008. Leipzig Corpora Collection. Dataset. https://corpora.uni-leipzig.de?corpusId=eng_news_2008 . Retrieved 07 January 2024. R Core Team (2021). R: A language and environment for statistical computing. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria. https://www.R-project.org/ . |

Table 1: Types of sources and how to reference them

3.2 Theses

If you are looking for a topic and supervisor for your bachelor’s or master’s thesis, the first step is to check the essential information available on our department’s website, including a list of potential supervisors.

If you are considering the possibility of pursuing your thesis under my supervision, please submit an inquiry via email with the subject line “inquiry for thesis supervision - your full name” and the following details:

- what subjects you study and in which semester,
- what linguistic courses you have taken so far, and what linguistic courses in which semester you have taken under my instruction,
- 1-2 possible topics in order of preference, each with a short reference list of 1-2 papers, and
- a preliminary time plan.

3.3 Checklist

The following checklist is designed to assist you in evaluating the readiness of your paper for submission.

- make sure your structure adheres to the one given in section 2.2
- correct bibliography and citation style
- consistency in font size and style
- linguistic examples are numbered consistently
- check your grammar and spelling (have your paper or thesis proofread by a friend or a native speaker!)
- Eidesstaatliche Erklärung

References

- Carey, S. (2004). Bootstrapping & the origin of concepts. *Daedalus*, 133(1):59–68.
- David, J. (2022). *Mighty Multiple Modals: Jamaican Creole Modality and Language Contact*. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, BA Thesis (Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Artemis Alexiadou, Prof. Dr. Mingya Liu).
- De Bastiani, C. and Hinterholz, R. (2020). On the syntax of object pronouns in Old English and Early Middle English. *Glossa*, 5(1):1–29.
- Mensh, B. and Kording, K. (2017). Ten simple rules for structuring papers. *PLOS Computational Biology*, 13(9):e1005619.
- Mufwene, S. S. (2001). *The Ecology of Language Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Neustädt, N. (2023). *Modal Marvels and Linguistic Puzzles: Double Modals in Contemporary English*. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, BA Thesis (Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Mingya Liu, PD. Dr. Florian Schäfer).
- Sun, Y. (2022). Decomposing same. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 40(3):911–931.