

LING 203 English language: past and present

Essay topics

Assessment for term 1 will be by essay (1,500-2,000 words — NOTE: this is shorter than the normal 2,000-2,500 word limit) on an aspect of English grammar, present-day or historical. The deadline will be Mon 15 January 2007, 4pm. If you need to apply for an extension please refer to the relevant section in your Part 2 Handbook concerning the regulations, and note that the person to contact is Elena Semino. Many of the questions below refer to English grammars, present-day and historical; for the full references see the bibliography section on the Course outline I handed out in week 1. References that were not given in that bibliography are given in full here.

1. Record a conversation with/among your friends. To what extent are the features discussed in the lecture on the grammar of spoken English and in Ch. 14 of Biber et al. (1999) present in your data? You should analyse c.15 minutes of speech, and append a transcription at the end of your essay.

2. People often say that with *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien created a very realistic and complete fantasy realm. Various fans have pointed out that this applies to the languages he made up as well. The best grammar of these languages is Jim Allan's (1978) *An introduction to Elvish*, Frome: Bran's Head (which has been reprinted many times). In terms of the grammar, Quenya is especially well developed. Comparing Jim Allan's grammar (pp.19-20, 22-25, optionally supplemented with other relevant sources you may find, e.g. on the internet) to a good descriptive grammar of English (Biber et al. 1999, Huddleston & Pullum 2002, Quirk et al. 1985), describe the similarities and differences between the personal pronoun systems in Quenya and English. Alternatively, if you like, you may compare the Quenya system to the *Old English* personal pronouns (use e.g. Hogg 1992 or Jeremy Smith's 1999 *Essentials of early English*, London: Routledge, to find out more about the OE system).

3. Compare a passage from a historical English text to the corresponding passage in a modern translation (e.g. King James version of the Bible vs New International Version, or an original Middle English version of one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* vs a modern translation) and discuss the grammatical differences. Use a good historical grammar of English (e.g. Hogg 1992, Jeremy Smith's 1999 *Essentials of early English*, London: Routledge) as well as a good descriptive grammar of Present-day English (Biber et al. 1999, Huddleston & Pullum 2002, Quirk et al. 1985).

4. Compare one area of English grammar with the corresponding area of another language's grammar. Use good descriptive grammars for both languages; for English you may choose between Biber et al. (1999), Huddleston & Pullum (2002) and Quirk et al. (1985).

5. Record a *reality* tv show and analyse the use of tag questions in the participants' speech. What tag questions are used? To what extent are they used for the functions described in class and in good descriptive grammars of English (Biber et al. 1999, Huddleston & Pullum 2002, Quirk et al. 1985)? One thing you may want to look out for is possible dialectal differences. You will need to transcribe the show, and attach the transcription as an appendix.

6. Record a news bulletin (tv or radio, about 10 mins) and a comedy show or film (tv or radio, again, about 10 mins). Describe the sentence structures (declarative, interrogative, etc.) and

sentence functions (statement, question, etc.) used. Pay particular attention to differences in the extent to which the structure-function pairings are prototypical (declarative structure-statement function, interrogative-question, etc.) as against non-prototypical. You will need to transcribe the news bulletin and the comedy show/film (i.e. 10 minutes of both), and attach your transcriptions as appendices.

7. Givón (1993, Vol. II, p.266) gives a list of features that speakers can use to make their directive utterance less direct/more polite. Devise a questionnaire with directives that vary according to these features and find out to what extent his suggestions are correct. Using at least 10 subjects, present them with your sentences and have them rate the degree of impoliteness on a scale of e.g. 1 to 4. Do all features indeed play a role? Are some features more important than others? Do directives always become more polite if you simply add more and more of the features? One of the things that it will be interesting to find out is whether speakers find the “explicit mention of the manipulee pronoun (‘you’)” — as in *Shut up you!* — more polite than directives where this pronoun is absent — *Shut up!* — or actually *less* polite (which is what Börjars & Burridge 2001:127) suggest. You should append your questionnaires to your essay.

8. Compare the grammar of one English dialect to that of standard English (i.e. any grammatical differences you may observe, morphological and/or syntactic). For standard English, you *must* refer to a good descriptive grammar, i.e. Biber et al. (1999), Huddleston & Pullum (2002) or Quirk et al (1985). Some useful references for dialect grammar are: Trudgill, P. & J.K. Chambers, eds., (1991) *Dialects of English*, London: Longman, Milroy, J. & L. Milroy, eds., (1993) *Real English: The grammar of English dialects in the British Isles*, London: Longman and (to a lesser extent as less focused on English) Cheshire, J. & D. Stein, eds., (1997) *Taming the vernacular: From dialect to written standard language*, London: Longman.

9. Using a passage from David Beckham’s *My Side* or Katie Price’s *Being Jordan* to a passage from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. (I will upload these to the 203 www page), comment on the grammar of both authors, in particular the structure, length and complexity of the sentences and phrases. You may use tree diagrams to clarify your suggestions, though you don’t have to. In any case you *must* use proper and accurate grammatical terminology (i.e. simply saying that Joseph Conrad’s sentences are longer and more complex than David Beckham’s won’t do.) Please note that this should be a *linguistic* essay; comments on the style and other literary considerations are irrelevant.

10. Using the data set from the British National Corpus that I will upload to the 203 www page, compare and contrast the use of the *be*-passive as against the *get*-passive in Present-day English. What kinds of contexts favour one over the other? To what extent do the differences you observe conform to what was said in the lecture, in Dixon (1991: Ch.9) and in good descriptive grammars of English: Biber et al. (1999), Huddleston & Pullum (2002) and Quirk et al. (1985)?