

Essay question hints for the final exam

There are no completely right or wrong answers for the essay questions. You may agree or disagree with the statements contained in the question you choose. The answer to these questions is not written in the textbook. They require your own opinions and some kind of evidence to support your claims. Be sure that any statements you make are supported by factual evidence. You may need to take evidence from many parts of the course to support your arguments.

You may write your essay in either English or French. Be sure to write neatly so I don't have to guess what you are trying to say, especially if you are writing in French.

For those who cannot find material to write about, I have found some relevant quotations in the textbook (page numbers that follow are all from the textbook unless otherwise noted). You should find these quotations and read the text around them. I can't retype the whole textbook, but there is more material near the things I have quoted.

As you can see, it would be possible to write many pages on some of these topics, but you are limited in time during the exam and should not write more than 2-4 pages. You can't possibly have space to discuss all of the things mentioned under each of these headings. Pick the ones that are the most interesting and discuss them fully and clearly to the best of your ability. Do not assume the reader knows anything about your arguments. Explain everything you are trying to assert.

- 1. "Phonological reconstruction is never an automatic mechanical process. Linguists can only be guided by general principles to carry out their reconstructions." Discuss with reference to both comparative and internal reconstruction.**

Campbell, p. 126: "... we will talk about 'steps' in the application of the comparative method.... In practice, the comparative linguist typically jumps back and forth among these steps."

How do you know when to jump back and forth? Are there rules for when to do this?

p. 126: "... we look for potential cognates among related languages."

p. 127: "... it is the systematic correspondences ... which we discover ... which demonstrate true cognates."

How do we know what are potential cognates? How do we know what are related languages? If we need correspondence sets to "demonstrate true cognates," how can we get those. (First, we need cognates to find out what the correspondences are.)

p. 128: “There is not fixed rule about what should be done next”

Then how do we know what to do next? Are we just lost?

p. 129: “We reconstruct the proto-sound by postulating what the sound in the proto-language like was”

What if the sound change was an unlikely one? What if the sound change was an uncommon change?

p. 129: “... many languages have changed $s > h$, but change in the other direction $h > s$, is extremely rare.”

Okay, so it probably wasn't $h > s$, but even extremely rare things happen sometimes, so when can we propose that an uncommon sound change happened?

p. 131: “Caution is necessary, however, in the use of the majority-wins guideline...”
[read more on that page]

Is there some way we can make a decision and be sure that we are making the right decision? Are there decisions that are clearly wrong and couldn't possibly be the right decision?

p. 132: “We can never know for sure how accurately our reconstructed sound matches the actual sound of the formerly spoken proto-language ...”

Are we merely guessing, or is there some rules that lead us to propose a certain sound?

p. 145: “Certain inventories of sounds are found with frequency among the world's languages while some are not found at all and others only very rarely.”

Is the language we want to reconstruct one of those that has a very rare sound inventory? How do we know?

Are there certain sound inventories that are completely impossible? What evidence do we have for saying yes or no?

p. 147: “The reconstruction of a sound, a word or large portions of a proto-language is, in effect, a hypothesis, ... concerning what those aspects of the proto-language must have been like. Aspects of the hypothesized reconstruction can be tested and proven wrong, or can be modified based on new insights.” [read more that follows]

Some people say that, in the last 150 years, no language has changed more than proto-Indo-European. Of course, no-one still speaks it but new discoveries and new theories have constantly been added, causing the “picture” of PIE to be updated.

On internal reconstruction, read the steps on p. 226 and the discussion contained in them.

p. 240: “Sometimes it is suggested that internal reconstruction should be undertaken first and the comparative method applied afterwards. ... there is no rigid principle about which method is to be applied first ...”

So how do we know what to do first? (See discussion on p. 241).

2. “Gradual change and Neogrammarianism are incompatible.” Discuss.

p. 212 : “... two of the basic assumptions of the comparative method, ... that sound change is regular (the Neogrammarian hypothesis) and that there is no subsequent contact among the sister languages after the break-up of the proto-language.”

Is it reasonable to assume that sister languages have no subsequent contact? How often does this really happen? Even if we think that this never happens, does it help us to make an assumption that it does happen? What would be the result if we assumed the opposite: that all speakers are constantly in contact with the language that they have broken away from?

More to the point of the question, if change is regular, doesn't it have to be abrupt?

p. 219: (the transition problem) “What intermediate stages or processes does a language go through to get from a state before the change began to the state after the change has taken place? For example, a much-debated question is whether certain kinds of changes must be seen as gradual or abrupt.”

Let's say there is a regular change from $b > p$. If it is regular, it has to affect all speakers and all words with the relevant context equally (otherwise, it would be sporadic and there would not be any pattern to the change). So, one night everyone goes to bed pronouncing b and the next morning, they all wake up and start saying p instead. Is that a possible scenario?

If that isn't reasonable, how can change happen? Do certain groups of speakers adopt it before others? (see list on p. 221) Does it affect one word or group of words at a time? (see discussion of the wave theory on pp. 212-215) Does it spread regionally?

If we can gradually change words, speakers, or regions, how does each of those change? Wouldn't each of them have to be abrupt also?

p. 219: § 7.6 “Changes typically begin with variation, with alternative ways of saying the same thing entering the language.”

Do you have alternative ways of saying the same thing? When you pronounce a certain word more than once, does it always sound precisely the same? Getting back to our $b > p$

example, is it possible to *b* to change to *p* a little bit at a time, slowly, over years or decades? What about other sound changes, can they change slowly and gradually? If they do, can we say that the sound change is regular? Can it be regular?

If it is not regular, why can we find sounds that change exactly the same way in all or almost all the words in a language or all the regions where the language is spoken? Every person doesn't speak the same way now. Do you think people all spoke in exactly the same way as each other in proto-Indo-European times, pre-French or pre-English times?

Is it possible for a sound to change from a *b* to a *p* in 10 small steps? Why or why not? What implications does this have for babies learning the language? How is a sound change transmitted through generations of speakers?

3. “Using written documents to date a linguistic change is not as simple as it first appears.” Discuss.

Do you write exactly the way you speak? When language changes, does it change earlier in the written language or in the spoken language, or do both change at exactly the same time? Do people sometimes say things frequently that are hardly ever written down? Is it more common now to write informally than it was in the past?

How do we know the date of an old written document? Can we establish a date with certainty?

Is it always easy to find out how someone pronounces a word by looking at the way they spell it? When the pronunciation changes, does the spelling change? If it does, when does the spelling change? If people always pronounce a word the same way, do they always spell it the same way? Do people ever make spelling mistakes when they are writing a word?

Do you ever hear words or pronunciations that you probably would not find in any dictionary? Why would that be? Do words that are not written anywhere sometimes indicate the beginnings of a change?

p. 364: “[Written evidence] also reveals something about when the change takes place...”

Do you agree or disagree with this statement, given the example that it follows?

p. 370: “An indirect source of knowledge about changing pronunciation is the variant spellings ...”

How do you know these are not just “typographical” errors? Can we find out anything about pronunciation from rhyming words in songs and poetry? Would that help us to date changes? Does formal poetry tend to keep older forms longer than informal speech does? How would that affect our dating of linguistic changes?

It might also be useful to read the bottom half of p. 372.

4. Research in typology and universals has increasingly replaced absolute universals with implicational universals and tendencies. Discuss whether this makes the study of typology and universals more or less relevant for historical linguistics.

p. 146: “The knowledge of universals and typological expectations in this case would direct us to reconstruct the proto-language with nasals ...”

p. 155: “We find that the possible alternative with **h* ... would be inconsistent internally and typologically (leaving a system with *p, t, h*, but no *k*...)”

What would happen if we had no typological expectations at all in these cases? Would we still be able to do a plausible reconstruction?

Typology could be syntactic: subject-verb-object or subject-object-verb, for example or left-headed vs. right-headed phrases (do adjectives go before or after the noun they modify?). It could also be phonological, which is what we spend more time on in the course. See the short Crystal chapter at <http://www.languagechange.net/blog/2005/12/phonological-typology.html>

You can make absolute statements such as "All languages have stop consonants" or "Every language has /t/," but how do you deal with a language such as Hawaiian that doesn't have a /t/? You could say that 99% of languages have a /p, t, k/ and this would be accurate. So then it is possible to find a language with no /t/, but this would be an unusual language. (I'm fairly sure that there is no known language that does not have stops.) So, what we usually end up with is "universal tendencies" rather than "absolute universals." (If it is only a tendency, can we still say it is universal?)

The other important kind of statement in typology is an implicational one, where (in phonology) the existence of one phoneme in a language implies the existence of some other phoneme. For example, if a language contains /p/ it will also contain /k/. Only 4 exceptions occur in the 317-language database discussed by Crystal. See more examples under the heading "dependencies" on p. 165 of Crystal.

p. 226: “We must also check to make certain that the postulated reconstructions are typologically plausible and do not imply things that are impossible or highly unlikely in human languages.”

However, there are some languages with highly unlikely sound systems or forms. Does the change from absolute universals to implications and tendencies make it easier or hard for us to reconstruct such languages? What is the effect for reconstructing languages with very common sound systems and structures?

5. “If a present-day expert in Proto-Indo-European or some other reconstructed language could travel back in time and speak it to the proto-language’s native speakers, he or she would not be understood.” Discuss.

Many of the points listed under question 1 are also relevant to this one. Check through them and see how they would affect your opinion of the hypothetical situation in question 5. Some of the discussion for questions 2 and 3 is also relevant (regarding the abstract nature of reconstructed language and the variation that may have existed in the past).

Also directly relevant to this question is §5.6 “How Realistic are Reconstructed Proto-languages?” on pp. 166-167. How accurately can we reconstruct the sound system, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary?

p. 283: “... there has been no generally recognized approach to the treatment of syntactic change ...”

p. 297: “Opinions are sharply divided concerning whether syntax is reconstructable by the comparative method.”

How accurate can our syntactic reconstruction be, given statements like these?