Applying for PhD Positions
Maite Taboada
Department of Linguistics
Simon Fraser University
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1 Why a PhD

Most people want to do a PhD because they would like to stay in academia. While it is hard to predict what the (academic) job market will be by the time you finish, the trends are not encouraging.

Shrinkage in PhD positions in the US:
http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/posting.php?ID=945

Why doing a PhD is often a waste of time:
http://www.economist.com/node/17723223

Faulty Towers: The Crisis in Higher Education:

Fewer than 35% of Canadian PhDs land tenure-track jobs:

Issues to consider:

• Opportunity costs. You will spend time doing a PhD rather than other things, and will be poor for a very long time before you find a stable job (whether in your field or not).

• Finances. You will probably spend at least 5 years, maybe more, earning very little money, even having to pay your own way to conferences and other events that will strengthen your PhD. How will you support yourself? Also, think again about opportunity costs. You will be spending money, rather than earning it. And you will be delaying your entry into the job market (with consequences for life-long earnings, retirement pension, and opportunities for advancement).

Even after you earn a PhD, the financial situation is not clear. You may land a tenure-track job. Those are pretty well paid, but often not as well as most non-academic jobs. Most likely is that you will be in a string of low-pay, unstable positions (postdoc, lecturer, sessional).

• Moving. Doing a PhD often entails moving somewhere else. And landing a job almost certainly does. You may move 2, 3, or 4 times during the years when most people settle into their adulthood. This has repercussions on family life as well. If you have a partner who would also like to be employed, his or her education and career needs will come into play.

• Dedication and effort. You want to do a PhD because you are academically-inclined, enjoy research, and are good at it. But keep in mind that a PhD will also test your dedication. Unlike an undergraduate, or to a certain extent a master’s degree, a PhD is usually a pretty lonely enterprise.
2 If you still really, really want to

2.1 Factors to consider

You are doing this because you love it (see above about finances). Then you need to consider very carefully what kind of a degree you want to get, what area you want to work in, and with which supervisor.

Working backwards from the ideal job, search for faculty who have inspired you, or who you think have enviable positions. What did they do to get where they are? Where did they get their degrees? What kind of other training did they have?

You also need to think carefully about the area that you would like to pursue. Typically, people continue working on the same general area (sociolinguistics, phonology, syntax-semantics, etc.) throughout their entire careers.

Finally, there is the issue of supervisor and university. Where would you feel comfortable, what kind of program (high course load, one-on-one training, etc.) suits you better?

2.2 The application

Most programs look at the entire application, and may admit students for whom not all of the application materials are stellar, but in general, these are the factors that come into play:

- GPA
- Courses taken, and general background
- Statement of interest
- Writing sample
- GRE, TOEFL/IELTS scores (where applicable)
- Letters of recommendation
- Availability of space and funding in the program
- Availability of supervisor

You can start doing your homework early, by making sure you have the best transcripts possible. You should also research schools, and even contact potential supervisors, to make sure that they are available and willing to supervise you.

The statement of interest is one of the most important aspects of the application. It should show clearly your interest in an area that the department is strong in. Good statements of interest are those that are written for each university that you apply to. It should show good and clear writing at an appropriate academic level. There is no need for a lengthy personal history about why you are interested in linguistics, although a sentence or two in that direction is often helpful. It should show your command of the area of expertise, and your knowledge of the department and the potential advisor’s research projects. It should also show flexibility,
indicating that you would be willing and able to work in related areas, depending on the department’s situation.

In some universities, students are only admitted to work with a particular supervisor. In other, students are admitted on the strength of their application, and the supervisor is determined later. Make sure you know what kind of department you are applying for, and gear your statement of interest towards that.

Make sure that the letters of recommendation are recent, and written by people who know you well. If the writers are academics outside North America, and you are applying to North American universities, gently encourage your referees to become familiar with the letter of recommendation genre in North America. In general, good letters describe the candidate’s skills in detail, how the referee knows the candidate, and what the referee thinks of the candidate’s chances for success in the department to which they are applying.

2.3 Funding

Most departments offer some form of funding at the PhD level, but they love students who come with their own. Consider applying for SSHRC scholarships at the beginning of your last year of the master’s program, to start a PhD. Since this involves having a clear statement of research, and a university lined up by October of the year before you start the program (i.e., October 2012 if you want to start your PhD in September 2013), you need to think about this well in advance.

Consider tuition. Most Canadian schools expect you to pay tuition. Most American schools will pay for your tuition if you have some sort of financial package. Make sure you know what the tuition rates and conditions are. Also, keep in mind that cost of living changes from city to city.

Many European schools (depending on the country) offer full-time paid PhD positions. These are typically to write a thesis in a very specific area, often within a research project. But if the fit is right, you will do a degree while getting paid a decent salary. A lot of those positions are advertised in LINGUIST, but also make sure you look at specific mail list for your area. For instance, I know about Corpora-list, Languse, and Sysfling. Other areas will have their own mail lists, and network of communication.

2.4 Weighing in the possibilities

You may be lucky to be admitted to more than one university or department. If so, consider the options carefully. Your letter of acceptance will probably contain specifics about funding, if any is available. Make sure that you understand all the conditions. For instance, most departments do not guarantee TA funding. If TA funding is mentioned, make sure you understand whether there is a minimum guarantee, whether that guarantee is for multiple years or only your first one, and what kind of commitment it involves (marking, teaching one hour a week, or being fully in charge of a course).

Many schools have some sort of “competition” fund. If you are admitted to a particular department, and if you have a competitive offer from another university, let them know. They may be able to top up your offer with proof of the other university’s offer.

You may be able to visit the department, and meet the faculty. Ask if the department has funds to cover your expenses (they may not, but it doesn’t hurt to ask).
2.5 Starting your new degree

Take the time to get to know your department, fellow students and faculty. Make sure you explore everything that the university offers. This may be your last chance to take courses in areas a bit beyond your expertise, to explore other subjects, and to learn a lot in a short period of time.

Do keep an open mind. Consider the first year to be a trial period. Again, if a doctoral degree is not for you, it’s best to realize that early on than after 5 years of study.

3 Resources


Tomorrow’s Professor (with sections on graduate school): http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/tomprof/postings.php

University Affairs: Canadian magazine on academia. Columns with advice for graduate students, and job postings: http://www.universityaffairs.ca/

LINGUIST List (job postings and PhD positions, among many other resources): http://linguistlist.org/

Canadian Association of University Teachers Bulletin (job postings): http://www.cautionbulletin.ca/

Linguistic Society of America. Includes a listing of programs in North America: http://lsadc.org/