



**RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE  
COMMITTEE FOR THE EVALUATION OF LINGUISTICS STUDY PROGRAMS**

First of all, the department would like to thank the committee for its stimulating visit, and for its thorough and thoughtful report. We take the main conclusion of the report to be that the department is much on the right track and is actually doing very well. “The Committee was quite impressed with the department as a well-run and highly effective unit, indeed, something of a model Department of Linguistics” (p. 5). Given the hard work that we have put in over the last ten years (after a sequence of retirements in times of budget crisis) to get there and stay there, we found it very encouraging to read the committee’s evaluation about how well we are doing.

The committee has conveniently listed their main recommendations at the end of their report (chapter 4). We comment below on these points, and a few others, and then introduce a new development that addresses several issues discussed in the report without direct recommendations. We follow the committee’s outline into short term, intermediate term, and long term.

**General**

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- (1) **Recommendation:** “The committee encourages the administration to continue to recognize the distinctive characteristics of Linguistics within the Humanities and the excellence of the department, and to support the department where possible in areas such as faculty positions, student financial support, and the allocation of space” (p. 21).

**Response:** The department of Linguistics wholeheartedly agrees.

**Short term/immediate (~ within 1 year)**

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- (2) **Recommendation:** “It would be beneficial to allocate some space for graduate students. A single shared office, perhaps with closets in which personal belongings can be safely stored, may very well increase the levels of cooperation among students and their sense of belonging to the department” (p. 19).

**Response:** We wholeheartedly agree. A succession of department chairs continues to work very hard on the space problem, with some success (we got the lab), but overwhelming problems remain.

**Intermediate (~ within 2-3 year)**

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- (3) **Recommendation:** “The department’s clear first and most urgent priority for strengthening all aspects of their program is a new hire in language acquisition” (p. 9).

**Response:** The department’s chair has requested the dean to authorize a search in language acquisition. We were informed that, due to the economic crisis the university is facing, the university authorities may attend to our request after the beginning of the new academic year in October.

## Long term (until the next cycle of evaluation)

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- (4) **Recommendation:** “The committee recommends that the university help the department find ways to provide some funding for MA as well as PhD students for their professional development activities (travel, conference hosting, etc.)” (p. 16).

**Response:** There is some money available for travel for PhD students. Every student whose PhD proposal has been accepted (the so-called level 2 students) is entitled to one travel grant during his/her studies of up to 500\$ for a conference in Europe and up to 750\$ for a conference in the US. This is, of course, enough for some students, but not for all. There is currently no money available to support MA students.

- (5) **Recommendation:** “There is no formal TA training inside the department, but there is generally guidance available both from the faculty and from the more senior TAs, and there is a university-wide TA training program which the TAs may not have taken advantage of. Faculty are perceived as trying to be as helpful as possible” (p. 14).

**Response:** This year, the department is opening a workshop for the TAs, guided by Dr. Evan Cohen and Dr. Aya Meltzer, winners of teaching excellence awards. The workshop will provide training and serve as a support group.

- (6) **Recommendation:** “Some students considered that the course *Foundations of Theoretical Linguistics* was redundant and might be wasting precious course hours. The problem they report is that since the course is required of the single major students and not of all linguistics students, the material in it has to be included in later courses anyway. The department might want to give some thought to this curricular issue” (p. 10).

**Response:** The course “Foundations of Theoretical Linguistics” is obligatory for all students of linguistics (not only for single major students), including students in the linguistics-biology track, and excluding only students in the computational linguistics track, whose program requirements necessitate more syntax in the first year.

The course consists of two parts: a part on syntax, overlapping only minimally with the course “Beginners syntax” and with more stress on methodology (how to develop theories in syntax); and a part on the interface between syntax and other linguistic components – the conceptual system (lexical operations, categorization of concepts), the semantic system (aspect and telicity), pragmatics (deixis and anaphora), phonology (sentential stress and its relation to focus), and, starting this year, some relevant results in psycho- and neurolinguistics. These topics are not taught in any other mandatory course in the department.

We believe that *Foundations of Linguistics* is an important introductory course, which is not at all redundant in the program.

- (7) **Recommendation:** “The committee encourages more outreach to high school students and the general public to help educate the public about what linguistics is” (p. 21).

**Response:** We obviously agree, one can never do enough here. With respect to outreach to the general public, the department has been running a successful lecture series for the general public for several years now. As for outreach to high school students, we are considering teaming up with other linguistics departments in Israel to start running a National Linguistics Olympiad, the winner of which will be sent to the International Linguistics Olympiad. This is a huge project for us, as it requires a tremendous amount of human and financial resources, but we strongly believe that we will eventually get there. In addition, on two occasions in the past, we held open lectures to high school students; we got excellent feedback but we do not know whether

some of the participants eventually registered to linguistics. We will certainly consider doing it again, and this time to monitor the results.

- (8) **Recommendation:** *“The department may wish to consider developing protocols of assessment that are more programmatic and less directly tied to student grades; this may not be necessary, but the issue should perhaps be reviewed”* (p. 21).

**Response:** As the committee realizes, this requires long term rethinking about how to change the process of assessment, maneuvering within a large and complicated body of university regulations.

- (9) **Recommendation:** *“The university may wish to review the current internet-based teaching survey, whose reliability is widely questioned, and to find ways to improve it or replace it to provide more trustworthy ways of calibrating teaching effectiveness”* (p.22).

**Response:** The University has recently appointed a new director to the unit, who is in charge of teaching improvement. This unit is under continuous supervision by the vice-rector and uses professional advice to improve its methodologies.

### **New development**

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The Department of Linguistics at Tel-Aviv University and the linguistics section of the Language Logic and Cognition Center (LLCC) at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (HUJI) are applying for a highly competitive grant at the Humanities Fund, Yad Hanavid, for a joint PhD program. The proposal has already passed two stages in the evaluation process: It was fully supported at the university level (stage I) and was selected by the Fund’s committee to be sent to external reviewers (stage II). If and when successful, such a program will address a lot of the other issues that the committee brings up in its report:

- It will help with financial support for PhD students;
- It will increase the manpower resources;
- The new infrastructure and community established by this program would allow us to apply for major collaborative grants with other centers in Europe and North America
- We envision successful cross-fertilization between the joint HUJI-TAU graduate program and other units in both universities engaged in the study of language and cognition.
- By combining forces and taking advantage of the current grant, we firmly believe that a joint HUJI-TAU graduate program in linguistics could become a world-class hub for the study of linguistics.

We are very excited by these developments and while it is too early to foresee whether these developments will bear fruit, it does now seem to us that the establishment of an inter-university PhD program in linguistics ought to be an aim to be pursued.