



BA(Hons) in Linguistics Dissertation Topics

The following is a list of topics you can choose for your dissertation. Each of them has one or two supervisors. You can click on a title to read a summary of the proposed research project.

If you are interested in one or more of these topics, please contact the relevant supervisor(s) to discuss it further.

- [“I’m not prejudiced, but...”: Explicit and implicit expression of potentially discriminatory messages in media commentary](#) - *Dr Stavros Assimakopoulos*
- [The role of context in intercultural communication: A case study](#) - *Dr Stavros Assimakopoulos*
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- [Investigating indexical features in Maltese English](#) - *Dr Sarah Grech*
- [The intonation and prosodic structure of Maltese / Maltese English \(MalTE\)](#) - *Prof. Alexandra Vella*
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“I’m not prejudiced, but...”: Explicit and implicit expression of potentially discriminatory messages in media commentary

Dr Stavros Assimakopoulos

There are several linguistic strategies that people can use to tone down a potentially negative comment, especially when this is in relation to sensitive topics, like one’s opinion about different minority groups. In this setting, one very common strategy that people use is to first distance themselves from a discriminatory stance, by explicitly stating that they are not racist/sexist/a homophobe, etc., before going on to pass a comment that could easily be considered offensive. The proposed study will attempt to investigate the use of discourse connectives, such as ‘but’ in this context, by focusing on (1) the extent to which such strategies crop up in spontaneous commentary found in the local press or other media, and (2) the assessment of the relevant comments as positive or negative by a small representative sample of the local population. To this end, the student undertaking this dissertation could either make use of the data collected for the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. project or build his/her own corpus of such data from other sources, before conducting a questionnaire-based survey. Of course, other ways of investigating the topic could also be considered.

The role of context in intercultural communication: A case study

Dr Stavros Assimakopoulos

For this dissertation, the student will focus on the ways in which contextual differences (linguistic, encyclopaedic and cultural) affect the verbal interaction of individuals from different backgrounds when using English as a lingua franca. For this, the student will need to collect, orthographically transcribe and eventually analyse interaction data from two or more individuals who are not native speakers of English (or English-dominant for that matter) making conversation in English. In order to focus the topic a bit more, the student can choose a setting of their own liking (from business communication to just mundane everyday talk).

An analysis of orthographic depth in the Maltese writing system

Prof. Ray Fabri

Writing systems can be alphabetic, syllabic or logographic. Alphabetic systems are based on grapheme-phoneme relations which can display different degrees of complexity in how they relate letter to sound. Thus, languages which adopt an alphabetic system vary considerably with respect to what is known as orthographic depth, i.e., is the degree to which a written language deviates from a one-to-one letter-to-phoneme mapping. Orthographies which have complex letter-sound relations are known as deep orthographies, while those with a one-to-one mapping are known as shallow orthographies. Depth can vary on a continuum from shallow to deep, with different languages having orthographies that lie on different sections of the continuum. The study will explore the concept of orthographic depth and apply it to the Maltese writing system. It

involves familiarising oneself with the basic concepts and the current research on writing systems, identifying a procedure for measuring orthographic depth and analysing the orthography of Maltese in detail to place it on the continuum of depth.

What type of language is Maltese?

Prof. Ray Fabri

Greenberg (1967, 66) proposed a number of so-called language universals that inspired many linguists to further explore the extent to which languages have common properties. The discussion is ongoing and the concept of universals is often criticised. Specifically, Greenberg suggests that there are correlations between various language properties, e.g., between subject, verb, object order and the order of other constituents, such as appositions (prepositions and postpositions) and nouns. The project seeks to find out to what extent (a subset of) Greenbergian universals apply to Maltese syntax and morphology and, therefore, where Maltese may fit in, if at all, within a typology of languages. The project requires the collection of relevant data and a critical analysis within the context of current discussions on the concept of language universals and language types.

Modelling morpho-syntax

Prof. Ray Fabri

Optimality Theory (OT) and Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) are two of the most successful models of grammar that have been adopted to account for various grammatical phenomena in different languages. However, there have been only very few applications of these theories to Maltese data in order to explore specific syntactic phenomena, such as word order, case assignment, grammatical agreement, and morphological phenomena, such as inflectional paradigms, derivational relations, and word formation process (e.g. affixation, reduplication, ablaut). Students are encouraged to choose a theoretical framework and a specific area of grammar for analysis, to then collect the relevant data and analyse it within the chosen framework and in the context of similar studies in other languages.

Overlap in mundane and institutional talk-in-interaction

Dr Paul Falzon

The study seeks to compare overlap in mundane and institutional talk-in-interaction, matched for whether it is face-to-face, technology-mediated or human-machine in modality. It will first be established whether overlap in institutional talk (i.e. talk in which some business is transacted, e.g. a service is sought and provided or some other occupation-relevant task is engaged in) displays the underlying orderliness (e.g. orientation to one or more of: potential utterance completion point, projectable content or progressivity-arresting issues) associated with overlap in

mundane conversation, i.e. talk which fulfils an essentially social function. Overlap in the two forms of talk will then be analysed in terms of its locus of occurrence, i.e. utterance initial, medial or terminal, with a view to (i) establishing whether any differences exist in the distribution of the phenomenon in the two forms of talk; (ii) elucidating the nature of any existing differences; and (iii) seeking to account for any systematic differences.

1984 in the twenty-first century

Dr Paul Falzon

George Orwell published *1984* in 1948, in the wake of a worldwide struggle involving two ideologically opposed totalitarian systems (communism and fascism), one of which was embraced by the unlikely ally of what was essentially a democratic unity of nation states. Central to *1984* are the depiction of language, in the form of Newspeak, as an instrument of ideology, and the rewriting of history in acts of revisionism. This study is intended to be a discourse analytic account of the relevance of *1984* to contemporary socio-political discourses such as those engendered by political correctness, freedom of speech, fake news, cancel culture, and identity politics.

Investigating indexical features in Maltese English

Dr Sarah Grech

MalTE is clearly recognisable by native speakers of this variety, but research on the features which might act as triggers for such recognition is still sparse, and so far restricted to a limited range of characteristics. This dissertation will identify from the relevant literature, one linguistic feature or a related cluster of linguistic features for sociolinguistic investigation in order to understand the extent to which such characteristics of MalTE are socially meaningful, and to what extent they might contribute to the identifiability of this variety.

The intonation and prosodic structure of Maltese / Maltese English (MalTE)

Prof. Alexandra Vella

There are many aspects of the intonation and prosodic structure of Maltese which constitute as yet uncharted waters e.g. a tune signalling politeness has been identified but not fully described, exclamations, vocatives and imperatives seem to use a tune which includes a high tone linked further left than the more usual anchoring point of the stressed syllable, etc. Moreover, the variety of English of speakers of Maltese, MalTE, is often highly influenced by Maltese, at the level of its prosody as well as at other levels of structure. A dissertation in this area would allow the possibility of a contribution to knowledge of the intonation and prosodic structure of Maltese and/or MalTE through a description of a specific aspect or aspects of the intonation of Maltese and/or MalTE.

Fillers and/or other disfluency markers in spontaneous spoken Maltese or Maltese English

Prof. Alexandra Vella

Work on fillers, and to a lesser extent other disfluencies, in Maltese/Maltese English is to date limited to a study by Vella et al. (2011). The aim of a study in this area would be to identify and provide an in-depth analysis of the type and frequency of different fillers, as well as other disfluencies, which occur in spontaneous spoken Maltese. A description of both the phonetic and phonological characteristics of Maltese disfluencies, of their internal structure (on the lines of the model proposed by Levelt 1983), and of the contexts within which they occur, would also be carried out. Such a study would lend itself to various applications in the area of the development of various speech technologies for Maltese/Maltese English, as well as in other areas such as communication therapy and teaching.