FINDING A 120A TERM PAPER TOPIC

In selecting a topic and/or a data source for a 120A paper, a couple of good sources are the following:

- **Teaching grammars** of the language you would like to write on, particularly traditional teaching grammars from the 1950's or earlier. These are written for beginners, so they will describe the sounds, including alternations in some detail (generally described in terms of the orthography, with statements like “pronounce the letter g as soft before i” to describe a g/dʒ alternation), and they will usually give lots of examples. Your main task is to “translate” the non-linguistic description into serious phonological terms and formalisms.

- **Reference grammars** of the language you would like to work on. These are the most obvious type of book to look at, so you should probably start here, but reference grammars are often kind of technical, and typically they don’t include a lot of examples of particular phenomena, so you may have to supplement the data from a speaker of the language, a dictionary, or a teaching grammar.

- **Problem sets from introductory phonology textbooks**. The 120A syllabus lists a number of introductory phonology textbooks in addition to the Hayes book that we are using. Most of these include problem sets at the end or each chapter or have accompanying workbooks with problem sets keyed to the chapters. There are also stand-alone workbooks on phonology, such as Birgitte Bendixen, *Workbook in Generative Phonology*, mention in the list of topics for individual languages. Just about any of the problems from these sets could be the basis of a 120A paper. You would, in most cases, have to supplement the data from other sources, such as grammars, dictionaries, or your own knowledge if you speak the language, and you would have to consult one or more books on the language for further background to include in your paper.

- **The online library reference page**. Under keyword, enter "X phonology" (where “X” is the language you want, and the phrase is enclosed in quotation marks so that you don’t get all the books on “X” AND all the books on “phonology”!). You will usually find one or more books that will potentially be useful. If you then go to the general shelf area of the call number of one of those, you will find a lot more books on the same language, some of which will probably also be useful.

- **amazon.com**. You can use the amazon search function kind of like the UCLA library page, but it is often easier to use. In the first place, a library search will usually give a huge number of references, which can be confusing. Many of these will be technical, in foreign languages, very old, etc. Amazon will have more recent things in English and aimed at a less technically oriented audience. You can get an idea of what the book is like from the amazon page, then look it up in the library if it looks useful.

Below is a list of ideas about some of the more widely spoken and better described languages. Prof. Bruce Hayes compiled this list with particular reference to finding a topic for a “replication” paper, that is, a paper in which you see how someone else has described a phenomenon in some language, then check with native speakers of that language to see whether you can either “replicate” the published description with data
you collect or show differences from published descriptions. Most of the ideas here and the reference sources would be useful for a straight descriptive paper as well. In order to get this posted as quickly as I could, I have pretty much taken Prof. Hayes’s list as-is, with a few small additions. I hope to expand this with time.

**General for most European languages and lots of other languages.** A good source of phonological alternations (which is the best type of topic for a 120A paper) is verb paradigms. These add suffixes and/or prefixes that change from person to person and tense to tense and have varying effects on neighboring sounds, cause shifts in stress, and the like. Grammars will often list the interesting ones—the ones that have phonological alternations!—under “irregular verbs”. If a language has a case system, like Russian or German, noun and adjective paradigms with different affixes marking case, gender, and number are also often rich sources of alternations.

**Armenian**

Examine the pattern of reduplication exemplified in pairs like *sev* ‘black’ ~ *sep-sev* ‘very black’. Try to determine whether the reduplicated form is predictable. Test the productivity of the system by examining borrowed or made-up adjectives. Reference: Bert Vaux, *The Phonology of Armenian*.

**Cantonese**

Look at what happens to tones in reduplicated constructions, like *[hoN]* ‘red’ ~ *[hoN hoN dE i ~ ]* ‘kind of red’. Collect a set of pairs, consisting of simple forms and their reduplicated forms, and determine the rules for tone change in reduplicated constructions.

**English**

(i) **Diphthongization and other phonetic aspects of tense vowels:** The problem of *[o]* vs. *[oʊ]* before /l/ addressed in the first class generalizes to other vowels of English. For example, in my speech there are near-minimal pairs for a regular [i] and a velarized [iː], for example in *freely* [frɪli] vs. *mealy* [miːli]. The phonetic difference seems to depend on the division into morphemes (so, what would happen in monomorphemic words like *Healey*?). I think I understand what is going on with *[oʊ]* but I suspect other vowels work differently.

(ii) **Alternations affecting /æ/:** Find a speaker of a dialect of English that has a distinction between two kinds of /æ/: a lower [æ] in *banner* ‘flag’ and a higher [æ] in *banner* ‘one who bans’. Such speakers usually grew up in Northeastern coastal cities, from Boston to Philadelphia. The speaker can be yourself, if you qualify. For most such speakers, it is possible to predict in most words which kind of [æ] will occur. Collect a large number of words containing /æ/, and try to write rules that correctly make this prediction. Where it is impossible to predict which /æ/ occurs, indicate why. Reference:

(iii) **Alternations affecting diphthongs:** Same topic, but with the distinction between [ai] and [œ I]. Here are good reference is Vance, Timothy (1987) “‘Canadian Raising’ in some dialects of the Northern United States,” *American Speech* 62, 195-210.

(iv) **Alternations involving /t/ and /d/:** A topic as apparently well-studied as alternations of alveolar stops /t, d/ could be a topic, especially for native speakers of English. Hayes and Schuh, for example, seem to differ on environments for flapping, nasal and lateral release, and so forth. This topic would require some careful detailed study in order not to just repeat what is in the Hayes book or the Schuh sample paper, but the last word is definitely not in.

**French**

(i) **Liaison.** For general background, see two books by Bernard Tranel, *The Sounds of French* and *Concreteness in Generative Phonology*. An area where new data can be gathered is to check what happens when adjectives are placed before masculine nouns.

(ii) **Schwa Dropping.** Is the result of deleting a schwa the same as what you would get if there is no schwa there in the first place? Current work suggests yes, but more needs to be done... References: See Tranel, above, and Annie Rialland (1986) “Schwa et syllabes en français,” in Leo Wetzels and Engin Sezer, eds., *Studies in Compensatory Lengthening*. A classic book on French phonology, using the type of descriptive techniques that we have been using, is François Dell, *Les regles et les sons*.

**Farsi.** See Persian

**German**


(ii) **Allophones of /r/:** look in initial position, in consonant clusters, after long and short vowels. There are references on this but you will have to find them; I can’t remember where I’ve seen them.

A source that is written in the type of framework that we have been using in 120A is Theo Vennemann, *German Phonology*, a UCLA PhD thesis from the late 1960’s that should be available in the library.

**Hebrew (Modern)**

Examine the data in the problem set on p. 134-135 of the text *Generative Phonology: Description and Theory*, by Michael Kenstowicz and Charles Kisseberth. Focusing on either part b, part c, or part d of the problem, elicit the same data from a native speaker,
as well as further paradigms that show the same phenomena. Describe and analyze the phonological pattern of your own speaker.

**Hindi**


**Indonesian**


**The phonology of stem-final /h/ and /ʔ/:** See the book by Hans Laphiwa, YRL.

**Japanese**

(i) Collect a set of verbs illustrating all possible root endings (final vowel roots like *tabe*-ru and roots ending in all possible consonants, such as *kak-u*). Add different suffixes and account for alternations in the root and/or suffix. A good starting point for this project is the problem set on p. 100 of Sanford Schane and Birgitte Bendixen, *Workbook in Generative Phonology*.


(iii) **Mimetic palatalization:** Consider forms like [pʰokopʰoko] ‘jumping around imprudently’ (compare: [pokopoko] ‘up and down movement’). Reference: [R. Armin Mester and Junko Ito (1989) “Feature Predictability and Underspecification: Palatal Prosody in Japanese Mimetics” in *Language*, vol. 65, pp. 258-293.] Try making up new words and testing whether the generalizations that Ito and Mester propose are productive.


(v) **Rendaku:** This is seen in forms like [kami] ‘paper’ [orrigami] ‘paper folding’. For the basic data patterns, a good presentation is in “Phonology of Voicing in Japanese: theoretical consequences for morphological accessibility” by Ito Junko and Armin Mester, in *Linguistic Inquiry* 17:49-73, 1986. Test the productivity of rendaku with made-up forms. Test whether in productive usage the rule respects “Lyman’s Law”, described by Ito and Mester. See if Lyman’s Law holds true even at a distance, when the crucial voiced obstruent is two or more syllables away.
(vi) **Dajare:** This refers to Japanese puns based on creating “sound alike” compounds or phrases by sound substitution: there are several papers available online by Shigeto Kawahara, e.g. “Probing knowledge of similarity through puns”.

(vii) **Wug test novel verbal stems.** See Vance, Chap. 12.6, for one test in this area.

**Korean**


(ii) **Root final consonant clusters:** Korean has a fair number of roots that underlyingly end in consonant clusters, but in pronunciation, Korean does not allow more than one consonant at the beginning or end of a syllable. These consonant clusters must therefore be modified by various rules.

(iv) **Fates of Korean /h/:** Some Korean roots ending in /h/. When this /h/ appears in various environments, such as with suffixes or word final, a number of interesting things happen.

(iv) **Alternations in verbs:** Collect verbs with roots ending in all possible consonants and consonant clusters and add suffixes starting with a vowel (ㅗ ~ ㅗ is good), an obstruent (the citation suffix 더 will work), and a nasal (interrogative 뉘 should probably work). A good starting point is the problem on pp. 98-99 of Schane and Bendixen, *Workbook in Phonological Analysis.* There are two books, 500 Korean Verbs and 500 Korean Adjectives that provide hundreds of examples.


**Mandarin**

(i) The “Third Tone” rule and its relationship to syntactic structure. See [Cheng, Chin-Chuan (1973) *A Synchronic Phonology of Mandarin Chinese.*]  

(ii) The alternations triggered by the attachment of the diminutive suffix /-ɹ/. Many Mandarin speakers don’t have this suffix; you probably need someone from Beijing. Collect syllables of all types and see what happens when /-ɹ/ is added. Reference: [Jerry Norman (1988) *Chinese*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 141-145.]
Persian

(i) Determine the circumstances under which /j/ is inserted to break up a sequence of vowels, as in [ru-j-ef] ‘his face’ vs. [dane[dʒu-æm] ‘I am a student’. Reference: Wheeler Thackston, An Introduction to Modern Persian.


Russian

Russian has an amazing amount of phonology. Look up the Russian sections (using the index) of Kenstowicz and Kisseberth’s Generative Phonology (multiple copies in Powell Library) for helpful introductory material. The Phonetics of Russian by Daniel Jones and Dennis Ward has very well-organized data, though no analysis at all.

Particular sub-topics: phonology of voicing in obstruents, vowel reduction in stressless syllables, assimilation of palatalization.

Swedish

The system of pitch accents: how the accents are realized in context, what happens to the accents in compounds. For both, Swedish Pitch Accents in Sentence Perspective, by Gösta Bruce (1977), is an excellent source (but only for Stockholm dialect).

Spanish

(i) Spirantization of voiced stops: /bdg/ → [βðɣ]. See James Harris, Spanish Phonology, pp. 38-40. Note: most speakers of Los Angeles Spanish have a contrast between /b/ and /v/, which to some extent follows spelling. If you can find such a speaker, document the existence of the contrast for him/her in a large number of words. Does the exist of /v/ tend to inhibit the spirantization of /b/? (One would think it might, since one wants to avoid confusion between the similar [v] and [β].)

(ii) Distribution of allophones of flap /ɾ/ and trill /ɾ/ in various styles of speech: See James Harris, Stress and Syllabification in Spanish, pp. 62-71. The cases where a word ends in /ɾ/ and the next word begins in a vowel are particularly interesting. Regional dialects of Spanish differ a great deal in this phenomenon.


nice presentation of the basic patterns. Make up new imaginary words, get evaluations from native speakers of the well-formedness of each pattern.

(v) **Diminutives:** Elicit diminutives from bases varying in (a) syllable count (1, 2, 3 syllables), final segment (a, o, e, stressed vowel, r, l, s, n, d), (b) /j/ before final vowel. Check if the suffix you get is [-ito/a], [-sito/a], or [-esito/a]. The reference [Crowhurst, Megan J. 1992. Diminutives and augmentatives in Mexican Spanish: A prosodic analysis. Phonology 9.221-253. ] is hard for beginners but does lay out a number of very useful generalizations.

(vi) **“Irregular” verbs:** This includes verbs that change their vowels in the first syllable (puedo ~ podemos) and verbs that add a velar in the first person singular (tengo, conduskuo). Some verbs, like decir and hacer look highly irregular, but given the right underlying forms and rules, they can be show to work fairly regularly.

**Tagalog**


**Taiwanese**


(ii) Attach the connective particle /-e/ to a large number of words, and see what happens to stem-final consonants. Try a range of different speaking rates. Reference: Chai-Shune Hsu (1996) “A Phonetically-based Optimality-Theoretic Account of Consonant Reduction in Taiwanese,” in *UCLA Working Papers in Phonetics*, number 92, pp. 1-44.

**Thai**

The rules deleting glottal stop and neutralizing High and Low tones as Mid. Reference: Jackson Gandour (1976) *Aspects of Thai Tone.*

**Turkish**