Guidelines for ethical conduct of research in Linguistics

Procedures for Ethical Review of Research on Human Subjects

All research in Linguistics involving human subjects must be submitted for ethical review, usually by McGill University's Research Ethics Board II (or Research Ethics Board I in the case of research involving children), and must receive ethical approval before data collection can begin. This applies to research conducted by faculty members, graduate students, and undergraduate students. In the case of research funded by governmental organizations, research funds will not be released to the applicant until ethical approval has been documented. In the case of research relating to a Ph.D. dissertation, the dissertation will not be accepted, and the student will not graduate, until ethical approval is documented. In all cases, approval must be granted before the research is undertaken; it cannot be granted retroactively. Approval is granted on a 3-year basis, but annual renewal is required. The Research Ethics Board will notify applicants when renewal is required.

Individual research carried out by students, whether for a dissertation, a thesis, an independent study, or a class, is treated in the same way as research carried out by faculty members, with the exception that the application needs to be signed by the research supervisor (a faculty member) as well as by the applicant (the student). However, student research that is supervised by a faculty member and constitutes part of that faculty member's research program does not need separate ethical approval if the research program has already received ethical approval, providing the student's research activities do not differ substantially from those that were approved.

In cases where all of the students in a course do a similar or identical research project, a single application for ethical review covering all of the research projects in the course can be submitted by the instructor. In this case, the review will be department-internal, and will be carried out by the department's representative on the Research Ethics Board, except when this representative is the applicant, in which case it will be carried out by the Chair. If the departmental reviewer feels that the application warrants a higher level of scrutiny because of greater than minimal risks to participants, the applicant will be asked to submit the application to the Research Ethics Board for approval. Ethical approval for course-based research is granted on a 3-year basis, provided that the nature of the research does not change in this period.

Application forms for ethical review can be downloaded from the website of the Research Ethics Board:


The ethics officer is Ms. Lynda McNeil. She can be reached at (514) 398-6831, or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

In the case of expedited review (see below), the original plus 2 copies of the completed form should be sent to Ms. McNeil. In the case of full review, the original plus 7 copies of the completed form should be sent.

The Linguistics Department representative on Research Ethics Board II (research with adults) is Prof. Charles Boberg. He can be reached at charles.boberg@mcgill.ca. The
Principles for Ethical Conduct of Research on Human Subjects

LEVELS OF RISK IN RESEARCH ON HUMAN SUBJECTS

Linguistics, by its nature, depends on gathering linguistic data from speakers of a language, i.e. human subjects. In recent years, researchers, university administrations, and funding agencies have become increasingly attuned to ethical issues arising from this type of research. There is now a consensus that all research on human subjects must meet basic ethical standards, and a process of ethical review has been established.

The need for ethical scrutiny obviously rises in proportion to the potential risks to which participants are exposed. In some studies, for example, participants are asked about potentially embarrassing aspects of their personal lives, exposed to potentially hazardous substances, or required to undergo potentially painful or stressful procedures. In these high-risk cases, extremely strict ethical standards must be applied. The researcher must do everything possible to minimize risks to participants and must justify any unavoidable risks by demonstrating the scientific value of the research. Perhaps most importantly, prospective participants must be made aware of the exact nature of the risks and benefits associated with participation, so that they can make an informed decision about whether they want to participate.

Fortunately, most research in Linguistics does not involve this level of risk, and can be thought of as low-risk. Examples of low-risk research are: asking people for grammaticality judgments; having people read a list of words; or having people indicate their linguistic usage on a written questionnaire. More generally, research in Linguistics can be considered "low-risk" if it meets the following criteria:

1. the participants are a non-vulnerable population (i.e. independent, competent, unimpaired adults);
2. the information being collected is not of a sensitive or potentially private nature, i.e. people would not reasonably be embarrassed by other people knowing about it;
3. the method of gathering data is not physically invasive, or physically, psychologically, or emotionally stressful for the participant.

While low-risk research does not require the same level of ethical review as high-risk research, all research on human subjects in Linguistics is nevertheless subject to ethical review, expedited review in the case of low risk research. (See section B.1 Department of Linguistics Procedures for Ethical Review of Research on Human Subjects for more information on the review process.) All research on human subjects should meet the basic ethical standards set out below.

INFORMED CONSENT

Participants should give their explicit consent to participate in a study, based on adequate
knowledge of what is involved in the research, and particularly of the potential risks or benefits associated with participation. Crucially, participants must be competent to give this consent. Minors are not considered independently competent in this respect: studies of children must obtain informed consent from their parents or legal guardians as well as from the children themselves. Research in institutional settings, such as schools, hospitals, or seniors' residences, must be approved by the institution, in addition to getting informed consent from individual participants.

The standard procedure for obtaining informed consent is to have participants read a description of the study and the terms of participation, then sign a form saying that they agree to participate under those terms. A copy of this form is kept on file by the researcher, and the description of the research, along with contact information in case of questions, is left with the participant. Examples of an information letter and consent form are attached.

In many studies, such as quick, on-the-street interviews or casual, spontaneous consultations with native-speakers of a language, obtaining written consent is obviously inappropriate. In these cases, informed consent should be obtained orally. No consent is needed for anonymous observations of people's speech or behavior in public settings, but people must give their consent if their speech is to be recorded in any way; surreptitious recording is unethical. If you wish to record someone's speech, have them sign a written consent form stating that they agree to be recorded and to have the recording used in whatever manner you specify. It can be assumed that someone speaking in a public medium like radio, television, or film has already given their consent to be recorded; this speech is in the public domain (though it may be subject to copyright law). On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that someone who gave their consent to be recorded for one purpose in a private domain (e.g., a private meeting) has given their consent for that recording to be used for another purpose. In this case, further informed consent must be obtained.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

Participation in research must always be completely voluntary. Every participant always has the right to withdraw from a study at any time, and should be made aware of this right. An investigator should never pressure a participant to continue their involvement in a study, whatever may be the reason for withdrawing.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Most studies provide their participants with a guarantee that their personal or identifying data will be kept confidential. This usually means that only the researcher(s) will know the participant's identity, and that data will be reported only in aggregate form, i.e., not identifying individual participants. This issue doesn't usually arise under conditions of anonymous participation, but in some cases people can be identified by their voices, or by the things they say, not just by their names, so great care should be taken to ensure anonymity when it is promised. Moreover, participants should be made aware of exactly how their data will be used, and should give explicit written permission for any anticipated breach of confidentiality. If you plan to play a sample of someone's speech for a class or conference presentation, you must obtain their consent to do so.
In some fields, it is common to replace participants' names with codes and destroy audio records once transcriptions have been made. All identifying information is then removed from the transcripts, thereby ensuring anonymity. This is often inappropriate in Linguistics, particularly in the study of phonetic variables, where it is crucial to have a record of how someone said something, not just what they said. If audio records are to be kept, you should be able to assure participants that they will not be accessible to anyone other than the investigator(s) and that they will be used in a responsible and respectful manner for academic purposes.

COMPENSATION

It is generally considered acceptable to compensate research participants for their time or effort at reasonable rates, ranging from $5 to $25 per hour, depending on the difficulty of the task. Nonmonetary compensation is sometimes also offered. Compensation should always be presented as a way to offset disadvantages of participation, such as lost time, inconvenience, or transportation expenses, rather than as payment for services. It should not create an undue incentive to participate that is out of proportion to the disadvantages involved, or induce people to do something that might be against their better judgment. If compensation is provided, the participant should sign a receipt for it. Receipts will be required if compensation funds are to be reimbursed from a research grant.

DECEPTION AND DEBRIEFING

Some studies necessarily involve deception, because effective data collection depends on participants not being aware of what is being studied. Deception should only be practiced when necessary, and only to the necessary extent. If you have any concerns about how people will react when they discover the deception, your research should be submitted for formal ethical review. Low-risk research involves only minimal and innocuous deception.

Once data collection is complete, participants are normally granted the right to be "debriefed" about deceptive procedures and the nature of the study. This can be accomplished with a printed information sheet, or by talking with each participant and offering to answer any questions they may have about the study.

COMMUNICATION OF RESULTS

Participants are normally granted the right to receive basic information on the results of the study once these are available.

SAMPLES OF WRITTEN INFORMATION AND CONSENT MATERIALS

On the following pages, you will find samples of an information letter and consent form that might be used with a wide range of research projects in Linguistics. The particular details of your research project can be inserted at the points where capital letters are enclosed by square brackets. Depending on the nature of your project, some parts of these materials may not be suitable, and should be eliminated or replaced.
Sample Information Letter for Student Research with Human Subjects in Linguistics

[DATE]

To Prospective Participants:

I am a graduate/undergraduate student in Linguistics at McGill University (Montreal, Canada). I am conducting research for one of my courses, under the supervision of Dr. [FACULTY MEMBER], the course instructor. I would like to ask you to participate in my research.

My study, entitled [TITLE], examines [BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF STUDY].

Participants in my study will be asked to [PROCEDURES].

The data I collect will be [EXPLANATION OF ANALYSIS, USE, AND STORAGE OF DATA].

(Normally:) Your identity as a participant will remain confidential, and your name will never be publicly associated with the data you provide in oral or written presentations of my study. Data will be reported only in aggregate form. Individual participants will not be identified (or will be identified only by codes).

(Optional): Participants will be compensated for their time with [COMPENSATION]. If you wish to participate in this study, please read the consent form that accompanies this letter. If you accept the terms it sets forth and still wish to participate, please sign the form and return it to me.

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation or about my study, please feel free to contact me at (TEL. NO., E-MAIL ADDRESS), or my supervisor at (TEL. NO., EMAIL ADDRESS). In case of a problem that you feel cannot be addressed by me or my supervisor, you may also contact McGill University's Research Ethics Officer, Ms. Lynda McNeil, at (514) 398-6831, or lynda.mcnell@mcgill.ca.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

[SIGNATURE]

[NAME]
Principal Investigator.

NOTE TO STUDENT: some instructors prefer that this letter come from them. Consult your instructor about this.
Sample Consent Form for Student Research with Human Subjects in Linguistics

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

I, the undersigned, understand the following:

• that I am about to participate in a study entitled [TITLE], which is being conducted by [NAME] at the Linguistics Department of McGill University, and that the purpose of this research is to investigate [SUBJECT].
• that my participation in this study will entail [PROCEDURES, including any recording that is to be made].
• that my participation in this study is voluntary, and that no penalty or disadvantage will accrue to me for non-participation, nor any benefit for participation, (optional:) except that I will be paid [AMOUNT] in compensation for my time.
• that I may withdraw from the study at any time, and may refuse to answer any question I am asked.
• that I may participate anonymously or under a pseudonym, and will not be asked my name during the interview. No record will be kept of my name if I wish to remain anonymous.
• that even if anonymity is not important to me and I give my name to the investigator, my name will never be revealed in written or oral presentations of the study, and will never be associated publicly with any data from my interview.

(If a recording is made:)
• that portions of my interview may be played in linguistics classes or conference presentations, or transcribed in written reports, for demonstration purposes connected with linguistic analysis.
• that additional copies of my interview tape may be made for back-up purposes.
• that the original tape and all copies of it will be accessible only to [INVESTIGATOR(S)], will be used only for linguistic analysis (including in presentations as mentioned above), and will be kept in [LOCATION], which is locked when [INVESTIGATOR(S)] is/are not present.
• that I may contact [NAME] at [CONTACT INFO] if I have any questions or concerns relating to this project or to my participation in it.

By signing below, I certify that I have read and understood the foregoing terms and conditions, and that I agree to participate, in accordance with them, in the above-named study.

________________________________________________________________________
PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE                                             DATE

________________________________________________________________________
INVESTIGATOR SIGNATURE                                             DATE