

# Graduate school: Is it for me?

Albert Bickford and Stephen Marlett

University of North Dakota and  
Summer Institute of Linguistics, Mexico

Are you considering doing an M.A. in linguistics, or maybe even a Ph.D.? Are you wondering whether you should do part or all of it before you go to the field the first time? Do you feel lost when it comes to choosing where you should do the degree?

We hope that what you have in front of you will help—a set of questions you may want to ask before getting involved in a graduate degree program. We've tried to address specifically the needs of members of SIL International (<http://www.sil.org>) who are interested in degrees in linguistics. However, much of what we have to say is applicable regardless of what field you want to study in or whether you are an SIL member, so we're making it more widely available.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. How does graduate school differ from undergraduate work?

Graduate school (at least in the U.S.A.) differs from undergraduate work chiefly in two areas: the amount of specialization and the importance of other requirements besides coursework.

Graduate degrees always involve specialization, while undergraduate degrees (esp. liberal arts degrees) usually emphasize a broad education in a variety of fields. The specialization in graduate degrees often includes professional preparation for an academic career, one which involves research as well as teaching.

Unlike undergraduate degrees, which usually consist almost entirely of a set of course requirements, graduate degrees (especially at the doctoral level) almost always involve some significant set of experiences and requirements outside the classroom. These may include public presentations, teaching, supervised research and writing, comprehensive exams, an M.A. thesis or Ph.D. dissertation, as well as informal interaction with faculty and other students. There is a concern for practical experience in addition to theoretical knowledge. Students are often expected to make contributions to the department and to the research of its faculty. They must take a significant amount of initiative in determining what they need to know and in acquiring that knowledge on their own.

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<sup>1</sup> We have been greatly assisted by comments on this paper from Bob Dooley, George Huttar, Bill Merrifield, Anita Bickford and David Tuggy. Further suggestions are always welcome; send them to us at SIL, 16131 N. Vernon Dr., Tucson AZ 85739-9395 or by email to [albert\\_bickford@sil.org](mailto:albert_bickford@sil.org) or [steve\\_marlett@sil.org](mailto:steve_marlett@sil.org). The opinions we express here are our own; they are *not* official statements by SIL International or the University of North Dakota. The most recent version is available under "Materials for teaching Linguistics" on the SIL-UND website: <http://main.silund.org>

## 2. Graduate school and SIL training

Graduate work in linguistics (or any other field) should not be confused with the basic training required for field service with SIL. Although some courses in SIL basic training can be used toward a graduate degree at some universities, and although some places where SIL members work do in fact require an M.A. in linguistics, there is a difference in intent and focus between the two. SIL basic training is necessarily limited and is especially focused on preparing people to be field linguists; this includes work in related disciplines such as anthropology and education. Most graduate degrees are aimed at developing knowledge of a single field of study which enables people to do any of a number of different tasks within that field; a few are more specialized (like degrees in teaching English as a second language). Graduate degrees usually involve greater emphasis on independence, creativity, flexibility, on the ability to communicate one's knowledge to others, and on exposure to many people and ideas. Although SIL training is more 'practical' in one sense—in that it is specifically focused on the needs of linguistic fieldwork—the education provided by a good M.A. program may be the most practical for you in the long-run, because it will prepare you to think through problems that are unlike those covered in 'practical' courses.

In fact, both types of training are good and valuable; it depends on what you're looking for.

## 3. Should I do a graduate degree, and if so, why?

There is nothing about graduate school that makes it routinely the right choice for everyone; you have to consider seriously your situation, goals, and abilities and to determine if graduate school is right for *you*. Be sure to make this decision first, since all the others depend on it.

**Am I able to do an M.A. or Ph.D.?** Intelligence and aptitude for linguistic analysis are important factors here, but there are also several personal factors. You need creativity. You need a great deal of determination and perseverance, as there will be significant obstacles to overcome. You need skills to relate well to people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. You may need political acumen to avoid running afoul of conflicts between faculty members. You need to be comfortable with defining your own tasks, without needing people to tell you constantly what you should be doing or when. (If you have difficulty evaluating your own ability in these areas, talk with several of your teachers or others who know your abilities and let them help you decide.)

**Am I interested in the breadth of knowledge about linguistics (or some other field) that a graduate degree represents?** If you don't have a lot of love for academic work, and especially aren't willing to learn anything unless you can see an immediate practical application, you're probably better off not doing a graduate degree, especially a Ph.D. At least, postpone it until after you have substantial field experience and feel a greater need for a deeper background.

**If I've already taken SIL courses, what will a graduate degree provide for me that SIL basic training does not?** Some possible answers: extra specialization in some area (either a branch of linguistics, or familiarity with the languages in some part of the world), a professional credential, personal development in writing and research, or help in analyzing a particular language (after you've been on the field).

**Does working in a particular country require me to have a graduate degree (e.g. to get a visa)?** If so, ask yourself whether you want that country to determine what your educational background will be. Can you live up to the expectations that are placed on people with advanced degrees in that country, such as teaching, publication, and active involvement with other scholars? Are you willing to do so? Don't accept an assignment to a country that requires an M.A. unless doing an M.A. is a good decision for you, considering all other factors.

**How much consultant help and administrative guidance is available in the country where I (will) work?** If an assignment there requires a lot of independence, are you up to the challenge? If so, consider getting an M.A. before you go overseas and choose a school that will develop the independence and flexibility you will need. If not, find a country to work in where more help is available and think more in terms of doing a degree after some field experience, if at all.

**Can I afford it?** The financial cost of a degree program can be high, especially if you are studying outside your home state or country or if you are not in the right program at the right time. The length of time needed to complete a degree (especially a Ph.D.) is often not easily predictable, and you need to be flexible in your planning. Much of your planning in this area has to be done with specific institutions in mind, so we have postponed discussion of it until later.

**Will my family situation tolerate it?** Graduate school is hard work, and leaves less than usual time for relationships. Think carefully about what this will mean for you and your loved ones.

**Are my spouse, close friends, colleagues, supervisors in favor of the idea?** It's very difficult to do a graduate degree without a personal support system. You need to consider carefully, and then communicate to those around you, how this will help your work in a substantial way, since it is a big commitment of time and money. If you don't have the cooperation of those who are most important in your life, it may not be worth the trouble to try.

## 4. When should I do a graduate degree?

The basic decision to make now is whether you will do a graduate degree before doing any fieldwork or to wait until after you have field experience. Some graduate programs allow a third option: you do the coursework before the field, and return to do the thesis a few years later based on fieldwork.

**Would field experience be helpful before further study?** It's beneficial to have a storehouse of practical experience in a language before starting a graduate program; the relevance of things you're learning is much more apparent, and having data provides a ready source of topics for class discussions, papers, thesis, etc. Indeed, it is probably better to wait to write a thesis until you have a good-sized corpus of field data with interesting phenomena to explore. Applications to graduate schools (especially doctoral programs) often ask for samples of your writing. So, that's another reason for doing fieldwork before graduate school—it gives you a chance to practice writing up your findings in the form of smaller articles, polishing them with the help of field consultants, and if possible, publishing them. On the other hand, if you are one who absorbs material easily and are very interested in graduate study, it may be helpful for you to

start or even finish a graduate program before going to the field so that you can be that much better equipped to help others when you get there.

**When will I need the degree?** Many people don't need a graduate degree immediately. It may be several years before they are given much responsibility for teaching or consulting, and they may be better off waiting to do the degree until closer to the time they will need it. On the other hand, to work in some countries you must have an M.A., but even these countries may be willing to let you do it after some field experience or do it on the field.

**When will I have the time?** You need a substantial block of time (1-2 years minimum for an M.A., 3-5 years minimum for a Ph.D.) to spend on coursework. If you do a degree prefield, you (and those who are supporting you) need to be willing to wait that long for you to get to the field. If you do it after starting a field project, your supervisor will also need to be in favor of you being gone from your field project for at least that long.

## 5. What graduate school should I go to?

Graduate programs in linguistics vary widely in their areas of specialization. Although some programs are uniformly better than others, it is more important to identify whether a particular program is appropriate for you. What is good for one person may be terrible for another, and a school which is generally good may have very little to offer you in your particular situation.

A graduate program that is right for you will train you, through practical experience, to do the sorts of things that you would like to do (or will be expected to do) in your future work. This will probably include analysis, teaching, consulting, and/or writing.

In making the decision, try to concentrate more on the benefits you may receive from the program than on the costs (financial and otherwise); if the program is valuable enough, very often you can find some way to obtain the time, energy, and money it requires.

The following questions may be helpful in addition to the major factors sketched out above.

**Who teaches there? Are they well-qualified? What are their areas of specialization?** Look for people who can help you achieve your goals, who have expertise that you want to acquire. Don't expect faculty members to work with you on research that is far outside their area of expertise. Also, find out if the prestigious faculty listed in published materials are still actively involved in teaching and are accepting new students.

**Does the department and its faculty have a good reputation in general linguistic circles?** The value of a graduate degree, in the eyes of the scholarly world, depends a great deal on where it was earned. Find out who is publishing in the major linguistic journals and whose work you admire. Where do they teach? If having good credentials is important to you, get a degree at an institution with a good reputation.

**Does the department provide a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g. both formal and functional), or is it heavily slanted towards a particular theory or methodology?** Flexibility is important in fieldwork, as is familiarity with a variety of different ideas. Don't make the mistake of specializing too narrowly. On the other hand, some specialization is very valuable, so also avoid the mistake of being so broad that you can't do any one thing well.

**Is the faculty committed to providing their students with a quality education (or are they only interested in their own research)?** Will they work with you to get you through the program (or do they tend to hold on to their students for long periods of time because of the benefits the students provide to the department and their own research)? Unfortunately, some departments are less committed to helping their students get done than others. If possible, talk to students that are currently in the program, and find out how they feel about it. (This is more of a concern for doctorates than master's degrees.) One good way to do meet students is to attend major professional conferences, such as the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, or perhaps smaller conferences that accept a lot of papers from students. You'll be able to see people from many institutions, see what kind of work they are presenting, and talk with them about their experiences at each school.

**If you are interested in only a master's degree, will the school accept candidates who are only interested in an M.A., and do they value the M.A. for its own sake (independent of the doctoral program)?** In some schools, the M.A. is just a 'stepping stone' to a Ph.D. or a 'consolation prize' for those who drop out of the Ph.D. program. Such schools generally only accept people who they think have the ability and motivation to do a Ph.D. In other schools, M.A. students may not get the same help and attention that Ph.D. students receive. You'll be better off at a school that considers its M.A. to be an important and integral part of its graduate program.

**What prerequisites and other requirements for admission are there?** Some schools expect a fairly strong background in linguistics, others would rather have students from many other backgrounds. Usually basic SIL prefield training will prepare you well for a degree in linguistics, but if you don't meet the prerequisites for a school that you are particularly interested in, be sure to correspond with the school to see how flexible they are willing to be in this regard. You may have background in other areas that compensates for lack of some formal prerequisites.

**What requirements are there besides coursework? What options are there?** There's a lot more to many graduate degrees than just coursework. In some cases experiences like teaching, comprehensive exams, outside readings, papers and theses, public presentations, etc. are as important as the actual coursework. Look at these requirements carefully, and especially the different options that may be available at the same school (either in the number and type of the extra requirements, or in concentrations). Of the different options, which is the best quality and the most highly respected? Which is most commonly chosen?

**Will the program accept transfer credits, e.g. from SIL courses? How many, and which courses?** Many good graduate programs do not, since the idea in a graduate program often is to apprentice yourself to a particular set of faculty members. In these cases any prior coursework is not 'wasted'; you still have the training you gained from it, and it may play an important factor in getting you into the degree program in the first place. But, if you can transfer credits, that can be helpful. Ask the program that will be receiving the credits; they're the ones to make the decision. Do this early, perhaps even before admission to the program.

**Is the department torn by internal conflicts and personalities?** Some departments have a lot of infighting; others are more harmonious. Graduate students can easily get caught in the cross-fire between warring professors. If a department is known for internal strife, steer clear, or

at least know what you're getting into. (Especially ask current students in the program: Who are the leaders on the faculty? Who should you avoid offending, or avoid altogether?)

**For M.A. programs, is a thesis required?** Writing a thesis is one of the best ways to learn how to do research and write for a scholarly audience. Don't shy away from it just because it is a lot of work. It can be especially helpful if you do it after field experience and base it on your field data. In this way, you can get help in your analysis from people that you would not have access to on the field. Nevertheless, in some cases it may be better to do a non-thesis M.A.; just be sure you know what you're missing before you do this, that you can do without the valuable help and experience it provides or can gain these things in some other way.

**What are the costs, in terms of time?** How long do students typically spend in the program? Is there any absolute limit or any length of time after which financial aid becomes harder to obtain? (This is especially important if you plan to go to the field after taking some courses and before writing your thesis.)

**How much does it cost, in terms of money?** If you don't have the cash, find a program that will pay your way (see next paragraph). Don't, however be put off by out-of-state tuition; it may be quite easy to establish residency as a graduate student within a year and many graduate programs routinely cover out-of-state tuition for their students until they can establish residency.

**How much and what type of financial aid is available to cover your living expenses and tuition?** Are most students fully supported or only a few? Many Ph.D. programs provide substantial financial aid for their students, either by grants, research jobs (helping a faculty member or even sometimes working on your own research), and teaching jobs in linguistics or a related field. (If you work part-time, your program will probably take longer, of course.) These jobs are often an integral part of the total educational experience, even if they are not part of the formal degree requirements. Funding for master's students may be harder to come by. Financial aid may depend on how attractive you are as a potential student; if you can get some of your fieldwork written up and/or published before applying, this will probably help your standing. If you are a good candidate and the program is a strong one, you should expect that they will offer you some financial aid—at least tuition waivers and probably also a living stipend or graduate research or teaching assistantship. (This is true of Ph.D. programs in the U.S.A., at least.) If a department isn't willing to help pay your way, that may be a clue that they aren't very interested in you (and might not be very helpful in getting you through the various degree requirements either). Also, make sure that there is a reasonable chance of financial aid continuing throughout the program, not just the first year.

**Where is the program located?** Sometimes it can be better to be close to home. Costs are usually less in your home state, and you're closer to friends and family so you can keep those relationships active more easily. On the other hand, if you are living too close to family or other responsibilities, you may find yourself losing time that should be devoted to the study program (to finish sooner, to finish well, to take full advantage of the program, or to maintain your ranking for financial aid). Still, location should not be a primary factor in your decision; it's more important to find a program that is right for you overall. One other option to consider: do your graduate work in a foreign country, in or near where you will be doing fieldwork. Such programs may have specialties in languages similar to the one you will be working on, and you'll be making friends with people who will be invaluable (academically and politically) in your further

language program. At the same time, look into them carefully, as everything we have said above is likely to be different in other countries. The program may offer financial aid, or it may not (especially to non-citizens); it may emphasize writing or it may not; it may be well-recognized internationally or it may not. Again, don't choose a program just because it is conveniently-located; make sure it is going to be beneficial in the long run.

## 6. How should I go about deciding these things?

In thinking through these decisions, you will probably find it useful to talk to lots of people who are familiar with your career plans, field requirements, and/or the strengths and weaknesses of different graduate programs. Listen to people's recommendations, of course, but listen even more to the reasons behind their recommendations. Only you can decide if these reasons apply to you. And, as you talk to them, find out who else you should talk to.

If you are an SIL member, one person that must be involved in the decision-making process is your immediate supervisor. This is particularly true with regard to whether and when you should do graduate study; where you do it is more of a personal decision. Since your studies would take you away from other responsibilities, they need to be officially approved. For members who are still in basic training, this is normally done on the basis of recommendations from teachers in your SIL courses.

A valuable source of information at this stage is the *Directory of Programs in Linguistics in the United States & Canada*, available from the Linguistic Society of America on their website (<http://www.lsadc.org/>). It tells (among other things) what degrees are offered at each school, who teaches there, what their interests are, and phone numbers and addresses. Another is Patricia Keith-Spiegel's (1990) book *The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission: Psychology and related fields* (published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Hillsdale NJ). Linguistics is one of those 'related fields'; this is just about the most complete guide to graduate school application that you're likely to find.

You may find it helpful to contact the departments you are considering and ask for information about their programs. Ask specific questions like those we've discussed above. You might find it especially helpful at this stage to visit some of these schools, talk personally with faculty and students, and sit in on a few classes.

Give yourself enough lead time for your application. Deadlines are usually about six to nine months before enrollment, especially if you are requesting financial aid. (If you want to be considered for the best financial aid opportunities, an early application is very important.) Application generally involves filling in an application form, taking the general Graduate Record Examination (GRE), obtaining 2–3 letters of recommendation, and obtaining transcripts of previous graduate and undergraduate work.

Letters of recommendation are very important, so they should be from people who can vouch for your academic abilities in general and your readiness to plunge into specialized graduate studies. Their memories of you should be fresh. Choose such people carefully.

A graduate school is especially interested in finding students who want to study what that school does best, who can contribute to the program while in school, and who can contribute to

the field after finishing (and increase the school's reputation). Make sure your statement of interest, your recommendations, and any statements about related experience include anything about you that they will be interested in.