Sample Language Description Topics

Here is a collection of sample language description topics—any one of them would make for a fine submission, and could serve as a platform for a final paper. If you just cannot think of something to write about, you may choose to address one of these topics.

Note how "small" each topic seems—this is more or less what you should be aiming for. It is better to provide a thorough discussion in one or two pages, then to barely scratch the surface of some book-length topic.

1. Varieties of English will often show greater differences in their vowel systems than in their consonant inventories. If you speak, or have access to, a variety of English that exhibits a noticeably different pronunciation, try to identify how its vowel system differs from the vowel system of Standard American English. One way to diagnose such differences is to look for crucial word pairs that are pronounced identically in one variety, but distinctly in another. For instance, some speakers of American English pronounce the words *cot* and *caught* identically, while others distinguish the vowels in these two words. Likewise, some American English speakers do not distinguish between the words *pin* and *pen*, while others do. How systematic are the differences—do they appear only in certain words, or they affect every instance of the relevant vowel(s)? If there are several such differences, do they form a pattern?

2. Our discussion of English consonant phonemes barely touched upon the glottal stop [ʔ]. But in fact, many English speakers will reliably produce a glottal stop in certain words: for instance, the medial /t/ in *botany* is often realized as [ʔ]. On the other hand, the medial /t/ in the phonemically similar word *bottom* is much less likely to be realized as [ʔ], though for some speakers, this is also possible. And for seemingly all speakers, the medial /t/ in the word *botanical* must be realized as [t], rather than [ʔ]. Investigate this further—in what other words do we find the glottal stop? Does its appearance depend on the presence of certain neighboring sounds? Do the answers to these questions vary across speakers?

3. As we saw briefly in our discussion of [r]-dropping in Boston English, speakers are more likely to omit speech sounds in casual speech than they are in careful speech. In fact, this sort of omission is common to all varieties of English, even if its precise details might vary across varieties. Investigate this further—what are some of the sounds that are commonly dropped in casual speech? Are certain speech sounds more prone to being dropped than others? Are there certain sounds that are invariably pronounced, no matter how casual the speech? Does the position of the sound within the word matter at all?

4. English grammar provides for two different ways to question the object NP of a preposition: *Whom are you staying with _ ?* vs. *With whom are you staying _ ?* In the former, the preposition is "stranded", so to speak, while in the latter it is fronted along with the word *whom*, a phenomenon referred to as "pied-piping". Does every use of every English preposition allow for both "stranding" and "pied-piping"? Or do some prepositions (under some of their uses) only allow for one or the other process? (Consider the results of applying either question-formation process to the sentences *Poverty affects one's health in numerous ways* vs. *The alloy consists of several precious metals*.) Can you identify any grammatical factors that seem to affect the relative acceptability of these two question-formation processes?

5. Younger speakers of English will often find the following two sentences to be grammatical and synonymous: *I am excited about that movie* vs. *I am excited for that movie*. This constitutes a relatively recent change in the language: older generations of speakers will insist that *for* is unacceptable here. Nonetheless, even younger speakers of English cannot always exchange *about* with *for*: consider *I am sad about my breakup* vs. *I am sad for my breakup* and *I am surprised about my grade* vs. *I am surprised for my grade*. Investigate this further—are there other cases where *about* can be grammatically replaced by *for*? Do you see any patterns in the acceptable vs. unacceptable cases? Do different speakers generally agree about which replacements are acceptable, and which ones are not?

6. The following two sentences are essentially synonymous, and are almost syntactically identical: *You don't need to bring anything to class tomorrow* vs. *You need not bring anything to class tomorrow*. In each, the verb *need* is followed by a VP (*bring anything to class tomorrow*), but in the first sentence, the infinitival marker *to* appears before this VP. Let's call the first *need* "*need+to*", and the second *need* "bare *need*". Are there other ways in which *need+to* and bare *need* differ? Construct other sentence pairs involving *need+to* and bare *need* (e.g., sentences with auxiliary/modal verbs, sentences in the past/future tense, questions, etc.), and see if the structures of the two sentences differ in any noticeable ways. Are there any sentence pairs for which only one of the two is acceptable?