Jobs and Interviewing in Linguistics

Academic jobs can be tough to land, but academic jobs are not the only path for linguists. You can increase your chances of getting job offers if you have done significant work within more than one subfield, within related disciplines, in more applied areas of linguistics and/or in an internship in a non-academic setting. If pursuing an academic track, a job offer in a tenure-track position is the best-case scenario. As a recent grad, it’s likely that you won’t get such a job offer. Students who have finished, or who have a postdoc (and thus more teaching experience and publications) are generally hired first. Remember that some students have landed quite good jobs after having been on the job market for 2 or 3 years. If you don’t get a tenure-track job, there are other options. Temporary openings (some not advertised till late spring) will give you lots of useful teaching experience.

Postdoctoral fellowships provide a possibility for employment that most students drastically underestimate, perhaps because there have not traditionally been many postdocs in linguistics. However, in a tight job market, postdocs are a haven until you can produce a few more publications that will make you a stronger competitor the next time you apply for jobs. Do not just look for postdocs in linguistics - explore and exploit interdisciplinary connections, postdocs for people doing work on particular countries, etc. Start early - the application deadlines for many postdocs require that you submit proposals even before you know about your job prospects for the coming year. Applying for postdocs is time-consuming. You generally need to write a five-page statement describing the research you’ll do. But if you don’t do it, and find yourself without any job in June, you’ll wish you had.

I. Tips for Interviewing (at the LSA or afterwards)

Start thinking about how you’ll answer job interview questions. Your faculty are probably willing to stage mock-interviews. Consider taking advantage of that. At the very least, talk to faculty members about questions to expect. You will probably be well prepared to talk about your own research. Make sure you’re well-prepared to talk about teaching also. The faculty want a sense of what you are capable of and interested in. Research the teaching needs of your target departments, but don’t pretend you are capable of teaching something that you are not.

Work out two ways to explain to interviewers who you are - a short one sentence description, and a longer five minute summary of your research and interests. Practice these synopses as much as you can. You also need to be able to convince interviewers that your dissertation will be done by the time the job starts. This is very important. Below are other specific questions that people tend to ask:
Research

- Tell us about your dissertation. How does it contribute to the field?
- What are the most important developments going on in your subfield right now, and how do you see yourself fitting into them?

Curriculum and teaching

- What would you include in a certain course?
- What concepts would you expect students to acquire in a certain course?
- What textbook would you use?
- Name five courses that you could teach, and tell me a little about each.
- What is the dream course you would like to teach?
- How do you like to structure/organize courses? What is your teaching style?
- What is your preferred method of course evaluation?

Role commitments

- How and what can you contribute to our faculty?
- In what areas do you see yourself making professional contributions in the next five years?
- How much are you willing to participate in department and outside committees?

Yourself

- Tell us about yourself. (You can review your vita in conversational form, but you should go beyond that).
- Identify your greatest strengths and weaknesses.
- How would you think about living in this town/region?
- What would you do if you were unable to find a University position?
- Do you have any questions for us? (You should!)

II Tips for Job Interviews on Campus

A campus visit is not only an interview - it is an opportunity both for the faculty to find out how well you will fill their requirements, and for you to find out how the job fits yours.

Preparations

Since the job talk is probably the single most important aspect of the campus visit, it is very important to make arrangements for your talk before you go. When they call to make arrangements, ask questions!, e.g.:
• What kind of talk is expected (a 'research' or 'teaching' lecture, or both)?
• Who is the audience (faculty, students - what level?, members of other departments)?
• Should you bring handouts (if so, how many?), or will they be made there?
• If you use overhead, slides, etc., be sure to ask that they be available.

Once you have answers to these questions, give a dry run at your home institutions if at all possible, or at least outline the talk to your adviser, with your handout. Keep in mind that though the search committee may have read your work, most of the rest of the audience will not have, and even if they have, they want to know how you present it orally, how you field questions, how well you can explain your theoretical assumptions or defend your methodology, how energetic you are, how much of what you wrote is really your idea rather than your committee's, etc. So ask for and expect a tough grilling from your home campus audience.

Learn as much as possible about the campus you are going to visit. Who are the faculty, what is their main work? What kind of linguistics degrees does the department offer (Linguistics, cognitive science, Master's only, Ph.D. only)? To determine this, ask your adviser or others who might know, and get a recent catalog from your library or student advising center.

Travel arrangements will be largely your responsibility, but don't second-guess what the department you are visiting may have in mind. Again, before you go be sure to ask a lot of questions about general arrangements, e.g.:

• How long is the visit (1 or 2 days? - think about whether you want to stay an extra day on your own to check out the campus and town, housing, etc.?)?
• How will you meet (search committee, chair, undergrad and grad students, dean)?
• How many people are being interviewed?
• Will you be met at the airport, bus station, etc.? How will you be reimbursed for travel? (It is advisable to have a sizable amount of money or credit available for transportation, since reimbursement often takes several weeks).

The visit itself

Be sure to get a schedule of your visit when you arrive if you do not have a specific one beforehand. Check it over and if you specially want to visit with some group not on the schedule see if you can get the schedule changed to accommodate that wish. Check out the room where you will give your talk, and any equipment you many need.

Be prepared to answer the same kinds of questions as in the conference or telephone interview. You may find yourself asked the same question many times by different people, but treat it as a new question every time.

Aim to learn as much as possible about the department and the campus:
• Is there any major ongoing discussion of changes in the Linguistics curriculum, or in the campus-wide undergrad curriculum? If so, what could you contribute?
• What are the department's long-term goals?
• What is the teaching load? Does it differ for junior and senior faculty?
• Are there TAs? What is the campus' approach to training TAs?
• What kind of research support is there (computers, research and equipment grants, travel funds for conferences, field work)?
• What is the sabbatical policy?
• What kind of committee work or campus service is expected of faculty?
• What are the expectations for tenure? When is the tenure decision made? Are moving expenses covered?
• Is there general support, e.g. e-mail, secretarial help?
• What kinds of retirement, health, and other benefits are there?
• What is the campus community like?
• What is the local community like (job opportunities of spouses, partners, childcare)?

After the interview

You may have been asked to send proposed course outlines, further samples of your writing, etc. Be sure to do so right way.

Often appointment decisions may take longer than either you or the campus would like. It is appropriate for you (or your adviser) to call at intervals to find out your status once the decision date that the search committee has given you has passed.

If you have a job offer from one campus and are interested in another that has not yet reached a decision, be sure to let the latter know, and tell them what your deadline is.

III A Final Word

If you get a job offer, you'll need to decide for yourself whether you're happy with the department, the region, the salary, etc. You should definitely talk to as many people as possible about whether or not to take the position.

Many of us won't get a first job at an institution of the same stature as that in which we're doing our graduate training. Few of us will in fact ever have such jobs. There just aren't that many of them. But there are numerous other configurations of teaching, research, and service available in other institutions. If you are
able to define your interests as a scholar and as a teaching fairly broadly, then you are more likely to obtain a position - and a position that you're happy with. Good luck!

by Christopher Manning and Bonnie McElhinny

Sources


