Hello first year linguists,

I want to give you a bit of advice about your first year of the Linguistics Tripos. Unlike many subjects, you will likely have had almost no teaching in linguistics before. You are going to learn a lot of stuff in your first year! If you find yourself not liking everything you're doing, welcome to the club. Most linguists don't enjoy all of the first year course; I only enjoyed two of the four papers. But I encourage you to stick with it, particularly if you're feeling down at the end of Michaelmas. A lot of people would say the course improves in Lent term. Here are a few things to bear in mind:

1. Make use of the post Michaelmas break! Unlike a lot of subjects there aren't official mock exams organised by the department, so I think it is a good idea to spend a bit of your holiday consolidating what you've learned in your first term. However you revise, it means that you don't have to cram in as much to do after the end of Lent term.

2. Collaborate where you can! We linguists are a small group, generally 1-2 in each year at each college. Depending on how you work it may be an idea to pool your knowledge with those of other linguists. There is a Dropbox folder of essays from linguists across the Tripos that you can make use of and add to. You might find it helpful to discuss in a group some of the more challenging topics you encounter during the year, such as morphology. What worked for me was building up a friendship group of linguists by a group of us going out to dinner a few times a term. Making friends with other linguists can be really good because there are times when only another linguist is going to understand your struggles. Plus you can have conversations about linguistics that you simply can't have with non-linguists.

3. Extra reading! Showing that you've been reading around the subject beyond the reading list looks good in your supervision assignments and in your exams. The extra reading you can show should be the cherries on the cake to your essays; don't neglect the question to show off your extra reading. Some of the best opportunities to show what you know comes in the form of providing language data to exemplify some point – try to avoid the examples presented in your lectures. Going beyond English is generally a good idea. You may want to mention some theories you haven't been taught about (be they generative or not). But always make the contribution of your extra reading substantive: using up one of your points to show you have some obscure language data that's tenuously relevant isn't a good idea. A good time to do your extra reading is when you prepare for your weekly essays – you can reuse the information when it comes to exams.

4. Strategise your revision! Your exams are in Easter term, generally they are around Week 6, and they finish by the start of June. You don't have lectures or supervisions in Easter, so there is plenty of time. One of challenging features of the Tripos is that there isn't really a proscribed set of things you need to know. At one level this means you can tailor your revision more to your interests, but at another it means that knowing where to start is a bit difficult. Generally speaking you will need to answer 3 questions, on three distinct topics. So I think that for each paper you should be thinking about focussing your revision on 3-5 topics. That's not to say you should know nothing about other topics; the bare lecture content will do.

5. Make use of past papers! Kind of obvious but worth remembering. Compared to other subjects there aren't that many past papers, and during the short time that the course has been around there have been changes to courses in terms of their content and how the exams are structured. Nonetheless I recommend that you practise handwriting essays to time (about 1hr per essay). You can also use the past papers to give you an idea of what questions they might ask, though be wary with trying to predict too much what they are going to ask you. For some papers, like Li2, you can be pretty certain that there will be at least one essay on X-bar Theory. For others like Li3, it is more uncertain about exactly what they'll ask.
6. Learning studies! Generally in first year you are not required to actually mentioned specific citations in your exam essays. The exception here is Li3, which generally wants you to mention citations and the details of particular studies. When you're making use of a citation in an Li3 study, don't simply drop it in and leave it. Explain what was being investigated and how, and what the results were and why this study is relevant to the question. The trick will be to try and make this as concise as possible, so I suggest that as you encounter studies in Li3 over the course of the year, write them down somewhere with critical information about the study. I made the mistake of trying to do all of that in Easter term. Get a spread over Socio, Lang Acq and Psycho.

7. Exam essay technique! First thing – you generally have 1 hour to write each essay. So you can spend up to 15 minutes planning before you start writing. Take this from someone who doesn't usually plan supervision essays – you need to plan exam essays. Deciding how you are going to approach a question before writing is important in exams because it prevents you going off on tangents or dead end lines of reasoning. One important feature of doing well in the Tripos exams is understanding that the aim of the game is not to show how many facts you can regurgitate in 1 hour onto a page. The advice I was given by one of my supervisors in first year was to keep an essay as short as possible. We're not aiming for quantity of points, as we are for quality. Quality is partly measured in terms of relevance to the essay title. Remembering that linguistics is pretty data orientated, if you can include relevant data to exemplify your point then that would look good. One of the most important things that examiners reiterate in their reports is how in good essays, candidates say what they are going to do, and with each point they make they make clear why they are making that point. You're trying to give the examiners an efficient tour of your knowledge and the way you organise your information and understand how the points are related can make a big impact.

Remember that Easter term is not wholly composed of exams. You don't really have any supervisions aside from revision supervisions (which I encourage you to prepare for and take advantage of). You still need to eat and sleep and get out of your revision space once in a while. The weather is generally pretty good, so you might want to revise somewhere a bit different like in the Botanic Gardens. Above all remember that your performance in exams does not exclusively (or even significantly) define how good a linguist you are.

Feel free to get in touch with any of the linguists at Downing.

Best of luck,
Tom (tm522@cam.ac.uk)