

Department for the Study of Religion (DSR): Information on Graduate Languages and Language Exams (revised August 2013)

General Information

The DSR expects the use of languages in addition to English to be a normal part of the culture of scholarship. The language requirements of the DSR are in keeping with the overall character of the study of religion as a multi-lingual and international discipline. More directly, language skills are indispensable to sound and exacting scholarship in the study of religious phenomena and traditions. The DSR's language requirements are thus based on the following two considerations: (1) the increasing importance of printed scholarly work on religion in languages other than English; and (2) the specialized research need to read and comprehend primary sources not in translations, but in the original languages in which they were composed.

Language examinations are conducted by the Department under the supervision of the Graduate Administrator, and are usually set by a faculty member of the Department who uses the examination language for the study of religion. Examinations consist of the translation into English of a passage about religion taken from a scholarly publication or a primary source. To secure evidence of reading knowledge, examiners will select passages of approximately 350 words for modern languages in current use (including languages not written in the Roman alphabet, such as Hebrew, Arabic, or Chinese), and for a classical source language (such as ancient Greek, Latin, classical Arabic, Sanskrit). The time limit of THREE HOURS, and standard dictionaries are allowed. Examinations are conducted on an anonymous, double-blind basis, i.e., neither the examiner nor the student knows the identity of the other. Students must fill out an application well before the date of the exam they wish to take indicating the language to be examined, and their own area of interest. Please note that these forms are simply used as a guide to the Administrator and examiners, and do not guarantee that the examination passage will reflect the particular interests of any one student. Note too that exams are set for groups of students writing, rather than on an individual basis, unless only one student applies to write in that language at one time. Every effort is made to ensure that the examination will fairly assess language proficiency.

A passing grade for the PhD language requirement is a B+, which suggests strong reading proficiency (yet falls short of fluency). The MA language requirement may be fulfilled with a passing grade of B, which reflects reading proficiency. The meaning of these grades is discussed below.

Students are encouraged to take the examination up to three times a year each year until they have fulfilled their language requirement. Examinations are administered on the second/third/fourth Friday of September, January and April. Examinations are offered over two days on each occasion in order to permit students to write exams on two different languages. There is no maximum number of attempts possible. As exams are anonymous, failure will not reflect poorly on the student. Only passing grades are recorded on the student's transcript. NB: Doctoral students are required to attempt a language exam at least once each year until the requirement is fulfilled, in order to maintain "satisfactory progress" in the program each year.

Resources

Students are responsible for mastering the required languages, whether by formal course study or independently. The DSR promotes the enhancement of resources within the University of language study, and publishes a list at the start of each year of the language courses available. Many departments (including French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, Classics, East Asian, Near and Middle Eastern) offer undergraduate language courses, some designed specifically for graduate students. These are available to DSR students at no extra fee. Some departments also offer graduate level courses in ancient literary languages.

The DSR also supports language learning through informal reading groups, and in its peer mentorship programme, which conducts a weekly “languages group” throughout the year. These groups offer occasions for students working on their languages to gather and study together. As well, the DSR funds language TAs in some of the commonly studied languages to answer questions throughout the year. Contact the DSR Student Association or your student mentors for more information about these groups.

The Toronto School of Theology (located on the eastern edge of the St. George campus) offers reading courses for graduate students in some languages (e.g., biblical Greek and Hebrew, Latin, French, and German) on a regular basis, but for a supplementary fee (currently approximately \$800). Contact TST if you are interested in this option.

Successfully completed language courses do not exempt a student from a DSR language exam. All cases of exemption must be petitioned with the Director of Graduate Studies, and be supported by recommendations from the student’s Supervisory Committee.

A collection of past DSR language exams is available in the lounge (rm. 316) for study. Students should be careful to keep in mind that past exams are not a reliable indication of the content of future exams. They are available simply to aid in practice of translating exam-length passages.

Requirements

MA students are required to show evidence of reading knowledge of ONE language, in addition to English, before completing their degree. The language may be either a language of scholarship or a source language. Doctoral students are required to give evidence of reading knowledge of at least TWO languages, in addition to English, selected from languages of modern scholarship and necessary source languages, provided that at least one shall be a language of scholarship. The language requirements for PhD studies must be fulfilled before writing the General Examinations, normally before beginning of the third year of the programme. In addition to the two required languages, doctoral students may be asked by their Supervisory Committee to acquire and be tested on other languages. These exams need not be passed prior to the completion of the general exams, unless specified by the Supervisory Committee.

Students who have fulfilled the appropriate language requirement in the DSR’s MA programme *may* be exempted from taking further examination in those languages, so long as the exam was passed with a grade of B+ or higher.

Guidelines for Setting and Grading Exams

The purpose of the language examinations is to determine the degree of reading knowledge each student has with each language. A grade of B+ is required to pass the examination at the

doctoral level. A passing exam will demonstrate strong reading proficiency, but there is no expectation of fluency for a pass. It is expected that examiners will choose passages generic enough to assess reading proficiency without the students requiring knowledge of highly specialized vocabulary. In cases where highly specialized language is present, examiners will provide a glossary. Examiners are encouraged to avoid choosing passages that include passages from other languages or dialectics in order to avoid confusion.

No single rubric can cover all of the languages studied and examined at the DSR; nevertheless, papers with more than two major mistakes will not suffice. For the purpose of this discussion, a major error is one that concerns the grammatical structure of the text (e.g., the causal relationship between two sentences), whereas a minor error involves syntactical matters, that is, relations within a sentence (e.g., noun-adjective agreement). Thus, A+ exams will have no major or minor errors, and will express the sense and grammar of the original text clearly in English. A exams may include one or two minor errors, but no major errors, thus rendering the original language clearly in English. A- exams may include a few minor errors, but no more than one major error. A B+ exam will have no more than two major errors and a few minor errors. A passing grade of B for MA students will have no more than two major errors and some small number of minor errors. Please note that doctoral and MA students will be examined on the same examination texts.

Translations must be rendered in clear, comprehensible English. Students should leave time to write out a complete translation, without multiple crossings-out. Since the purpose of the exam is to determine reading facility in the original language, students should pay special attention to rendering the grammar of the original language in such a way as to demonstrate comprehension. While vocabulary is important, the examination is primarily aimed at determining grammatical and syntactical knowledge. Sense-to-sense (rather than word-to-word) translation is the norm, but this can only be judged fairly if the target translation reflects a clear sense of the original. For example, verb tenses, grammatical structures (main clauses, subordination, relation, concession etc), and subject-object and noun-adjective relationships must all be rendered clearly to reflect the original language, while expressing the sense in English.

Examiners are asked to leave clear feedback on problems on the graded exam, which is returned to the students. Students who wish to speak with the examiner should contact the Graduate Administrator after reading the comments included in the graded exam in order to arrange contact, if possible.

Reading Lists

The following lists represent the *kind* of authors that our French and German language examiners will choose in the DSR. It is not an exhaustive list, but a guide to the types and levels of scholarship students can expect to be examined on. Students preparing for exams in these languages are encouraged to consult the top journals for the study of religion (and cognate fields) in each language. If students are not sure which journals to consult, they should check with their advisors.

French-language authors

Pierre Bourdieu (Sociology of Religion)
Simone de Beauvoir (Feminist Theory, Existentialism)
Michel de Certeau (Social Historian)
Hélène Cixous (Feminist Theory)
Henry Corbin (Islamic Studies, Philosophy)
Émile Durkheim (Sociology of Religion)
Mircea Eliade (History of Religions)
Michel Foucault (Philosophy, Cultural Studies)
René Girard (History and Anthropology of Religion)
Pierre Hadot (Historian)
Julia Kristeva (Psychology of Religion)
Claude Lévi-Strauss (Anthropology of Religion)
Catherine Malabou (Philosophy of Religion)
Marcel Mauss (Anthropology of Religion)
Aline Rouselle (Historian of Religions in Antiquity)
Paul Veyne (Historian of Ancient Rome)

German-language authors

Walter Benjamin (Philosophy of Religion)
Rudolf Bultmann (Early Christianity)
Hannah Arendt (Sociology of Religion)
Erich Frauwallner (Hinduism/Buddhist Studies)
Ignaz Goldziher (Islamic Studies)
Gustave E. von Grunbaum (Buddhist Studies)
Paul Hacker (Hinduism)
Oskar von Hinüber (Buddhist Studies)
Sigmund Freud (Psychology of Religion)
Friedrich Nietzsche (Philosophy of Religion)
Max Weber (Sociology of Religion)
Ludwig Wittgenstein (Philosophy of Religion)
Franz Rosenzweig (Jewish Studies)