Term Paper Assignment

1. Task

Select a language on which there is at least a modicum of phonological research literature (more than one source). Write a paper consisting of two roughly equal parts: (1) a brief review of the basics of the phonology of the language, outlining the principal topics of interest; (2) a discussion of how data from this language could be made to bear on any issues taught in this course or in Linguistics 200A. The finished project should be no more than twenty pages long.

The idea is to have an exercise in alternating your attention between typical theoretical discussion (often with idealized, carefully selected data) and the detailed data from empirical studies (which almost always involve complications).

Part (2), the theoretical part, should focus on just one issue (and thus, constitute the core of a research paper).

2. Schedule

To keep things moving along (and above all, avoid Incompletes), I’d like you to adhere to the following due dates:

- Class 8 (2/3): have your language selected; and do a literature search (some methods for doing this will be given in class). Hand in your list of references, indicating for each where you found it.
- Class 12 (2/19): hand in a draft of the first half of the paper, covering the descriptive basics.
- Friday of Finals week (3/21): paper due.

3. Exemplification

If you were doing Japanese, the descriptive section might cover:

- phoneme inventory with chart
- issues of “marginal” phonemes like /ɸ/, from massive borrowing
- strict syllable canon, with “required homorganic” codas
- verb stem alternations: the 11 possible underlying final consonants of verb stems, and how they alternate
- alternations in compounds: Rendaku and Lyman’s Law
- pitch accent: phonemic status, rules governing accent in verb paradigms and compounds (just a brief sketch, since this system is huge)
• phonologically-interesting morphology: diminutive formation; palatalization in mimetics

None of this can be covered in great detail, especially given that the discussion would be very dry without the inclusion of examples. Instead, cite references where the details can be found.

The “relate the language to material in the course” could be about anything; some possibilities for Japanese are as follows. These are off the top of my head and might not make sense to you before the relevant material is covered here; they are meant to give you an idea of possible questions to ask.

• Japanese verbs and Richness of the Base: why does Japanese respect a strict limit of 11 types of consonant stems, instead of having one stem type for each consonant/cluster as Richness of the Base would lead us to expect?
• Rendaku and the theory of rule locality: can a distal voiced obstruent be “seen” as clearly as a local one?
• Japanese and feature theory: what theory can accommodate the two ways that the coda nasal assimilates to /s/ (i.e. becoming either the stop [n] or fricationless nasalized [ʔ])?
• Mimetic palatalization: given the power provided by OT, is it possible to dispense with the underspecification assumptions (problematic for Richness of the Base) assumed by Ito and Mester (1989, Lg.)?

4. Advice from previous rounds

Students have done this assignment before, yielding the following bits of experience, pertaining to the first half of the paper:

• Give straight facts and generalizations before interpretation.¹
• Often a big challenge for Part I is that your source material can have a heavy theoretical slant. Unpack such theory-based descriptions into straight empirical descriptions, or keeping looking for reference sources until you find something that gives you straight facts.
• Give the basics of segment sequencing (e.g. syllable structure) in addition to phonemes/allophones.
• Illustrate what you say with example words.
• Justify all underlying forms by citing other members of the same paradigm. Example: “hymn /hɪm/ [ʼhɪm] (cf. hymnal [ʼhɪml])”
• Maximize intelligibility for the general linguist reader by turning all transcriptions into IPA. Sources: Handbook of the IPA; Ladefoged A Course in Phonetics; Pullum and Ladusaw Phonetic Symbol Guide; http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/IPA/fullchart.html

¹ I think it’s fair to say there’s a tacit assumption in linguistics: give enough data that someone who has an analysis or interpretation that’s different from your could check it out.