

Linguist interview questions

careers.com.au: common questions and what they're really testing

What to expect

Interviews for linguist roles vary by sector, but they tend to probe both your analytical depth and your ability to apply linguistics in real settings. You may be asked to demonstrate technical skills, discuss fieldwork, or explain how you would handle a policy or teaching task.

- **Technical and analytical:** Questions about grammar, phonetics, statistics, or your approach to analysing an unfamiliar language. Expect to walk through your reasoning.
- **Field research scenario:** How you would plan and adapt data collection in the field, often with ethical and logistical constraints.
- **Applied linguistics and technology:** Your experience with tools like Praat, ELAN, or Python, and how you would build language resources or models.
- **Teaching and communication:** How you explain complex ideas to students or non-specialists, and how you handle a classroom or stakeholder briefing.
- **Policy and written work:** How you would write a report or brief, and how you weigh evidence and stakeholder needs.

Typically a two-stage process. First, a conversation with a hiring manager or academic panel covering your background and motivation. Second, a technical interview, research presentation, or practical task. For academic roles, you may give a job talk and meet the department. For industry or government roles, expect a task using real or sample data.

1. Can you walk us through how you would analyse the sound system of an unfamiliar language?

Why they ask

This assesses your phonetic and analytical skills, and whether you can work methodically from raw data to a description.

How to structure your answer

A walk-through. Start with data collection, move to transcription, then analysis, and finish with verification.

Example answer

"First, I would work with speakers to record a wordlist and some natural speech, making sure I have good audio quality and informed consent. I would transcribe the recordings using the International Phonetic Alphabet, checking my impressions with the speakers. Then I would use Praat to measure acoustic properties like vowel formants and voice onset time. I would look for contrasts that are meaningful in the language, such as whether aspiration or tone changes word meaning. After that, I would build a preliminary inventory of consonants and vowels, and test it against new data. Finally, I would share my analysis with the community and other linguists to check for errors. In a previous project, this approach helped me identify a vowel merger that had not been described before."

2. Tell me about a time you had to adapt your fieldwork approach when things did not go to plan.

Why they ask

Fieldwork rarely goes smoothly, and employers want to know you can stay flexible and respectful.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result.

Example answer

"I was in a remote community to record speakers for a documentation project. On the second day, a planned group session fell through because a community event took priority. My task was to collect enough high-quality recordings without disrupting community life. I spoke with a local contact and we rearranged the schedule to fit around the event, and I switched to one-on-one recordings with people who were available. I also used the extra time to review my notes and prepare better elicitation materials. As a result, I ended up with more varied speech samples than I would have got from the original plan, and the community appreciated that I did not push. I learned to build flexibility into every fieldwork timetable."

3. You are asked to build a speech recognition model for a language with very little recorded data. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests your problem-solving with language technology and your ability to work within constraints.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure. Outline your first steps, then trade-offs, then a realistic plan.

Example answer

"First, I would find out what data already exists, including any archived recordings, community collections, or text corpora. I would also talk to the community about their goals and any restrictions on use. With very little data, I would not start with a large end-to-end model. Instead, I would use transfer learning from a related language or a multilingual model, and focus on collecting a small, high-quality dataset with clear consent. I would use tools like Kaldi or a Python-based framework, and I would evaluate on a held-out set of recordings. I would also set expectations: the model might work for a limited vocabulary or specific speakers at first. The key is to build something useful and ethical, and to keep the community involved in decisions about the data and the output."

4. How would you teach a first-year linguistics unit to students with no background in the subject?

Why they ask

Many linguist roles include teaching, and this shows you can make complex ideas accessible.

How to structure your answer

Approach, example, outcome. Explain your philosophy, give a concrete activity, and say what students take away.

Example answer

"I would start by connecting linguistics to things students already do with language, like texting or translating, so they see it as relevant. For a topic like phonetics, I would not begin with a chart and jargon. Instead, I would have students listen to sounds from a few languages and try to describe what their mouth is doing. Then I would introduce the IPA as a tool to write down those observations. I would use small-group work and weekly quizzes to check understanding, and I would provide recordings for practice. In a unit I taught, this approach helped students who were nervous about the subject to participate more in tutorials and to feel confident analysing their own speech. The outcome I want is that students can think like linguists, not just memorise terms."

5. How would you approach writing a policy brief on language maintenance for a government department?

Why they ask

This role often involves translating research for decision-makers, and this tests your written communication and judgement.

How to structure your answer

Step-by-step process: define the problem, gather evidence, consult, structure the brief, and tailor recommendations.

Example answer

"First, I would clarify the scope with the department. Is the brief about Indigenous languages, community languages, or both? Then I would gather evidence from academic research, census data, and community consultations. I would also look at existing government programs and reviews, so I am not duplicating work. I would speak with community organisations and language centres to understand what is actually needed on the ground. When writing, I would keep it short and use plain language, with a clear summary at the top. I would present options with trade-offs, and make recommendations that are realistic and costed at a high level. In a previous brief, I focused on how small grants for community language classes could be made more accessible, and that helped inform a review of the grants program. The goal is always to give the reader something they can act on."

6. Describe a time you worked with community members or stakeholders on a language project where their goals differed from research goals.

Why they ask

Linguists often balance community wishes with academic or commercial objectives, and this probes your ethical judgement.

How to structure your answer

STAR, with a focus on how you negotiated and what you learned.

Example answer

"I was part of a project documenting a language where the community wanted materials for a school program, while the research team needed data for a grammar. I was the main contact for the community. I set up a meeting where we listed both sets of goals and looked for overlap. We agreed that I would record extra examples that could be used in the school materials, and that the community would review any excerpts used in academic papers. I also helped design a simple picture dictionary as a first output with a small team. The result was that the community got a useful resource, and the researchers got richer data because people were more engaged. I learned that being upfront about different goals, and sharing control over the work, makes projects stronger."