Modern Language Association MLA

Midyear Report on the 2008–09 MLA *Job Information List*

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Midyear Report on the 2008–09 MLA *Job Information List*

Through 20 February, the English edition of the MLA *Job Information List* (*JIL*) has carried 322 (21.9%) fewer ads this year (2008–09) than last; the foreign language edition is down 270 ads (21.2%). On the basis of the number of jobs announced in the *JIL* through the April print issue, we project that this year's totals will drop by 26.1%, to about 1,350 jobs, in the *JIL*'s English edition and by 27.4%, to about 1,220 jobs, in the foreign language edition. The declines follow a period when the number of jobs advertised in both English and foreign languages increased from fewer than 1,100 in the mid-1990s to 1,826 in English and 1,680 in foreign languages this past year, 2007–08. We are projecting an estimated 480 fewer jobs in English in 2008–09 than a year ago and 460 fewer in foreign languages. These declines mark the biggest one-year drops in the thirty-four-year history of the *JIL*, both numerically and in percentage terms. Even so, this year's projected totals are still higher than the historic low numbers to date—1,075 jobs in English and 1,047 jobs in foreign languages—recorded in 1993–94. (Ads published in the 2008–09 *JIL* that departments have since marked "search canceled" have been excluded in calculating these totals. Of 1,998 ads published in the *JIL* through 13 March 2009, 59 [3.0%] have been marked "search canceled." The figure doubtless understates the reality, since departments must return to the Web site to update their ads with comments about the status of their searches.)

The *JIL* is not a complete census of positions. Part-time positions that departments fill each year are completely absent from the *JIL*—more than 99% of the positions advertised in the *JIL* each year are full-time—and the *JIL* captures only some of the full-time non-tenure-track positions departments fill. Nor do all institutions use the *JIL* to advertise even tenure-track appointments in their modern language faculties. Two-year institutions are especially underrepresented in the *JIL*, even though two-year colleges may place ads at no charge. Despite the limitations in the *JIL*'s coverage, across time the ups and downs in the number of ads and jobs offer a good indicator of ups and downs in academic job opportunities in four-year colleges and universities, especially full-time tenure-track assistant professorships.

Figure 1 shows the trend lines for the total number of jobs advertised in the English and foreign language editions of the *JIL* since 1975–76, including a projection for 2008–09 based on the number of jobs announced through the April issues. As the trend lines show, the severity of this year's drop in the number of jobs is approached only by the decline that occurred in 1990–91. (Again, in calculating totals for 2008–09, jobs in ads marked "search canceled" have been subtracted; the feature that allows departments to mark previously published ads with updates like "search canceled," "MLA interviews scheduled," or "position filled" is new in 2008–09.)

Figure 2 (for the English edition) and figure 3 (for the foreign language edition) show the breakdown for the number of jobs advertised in each of the *JIL*'s five seasonal issues—October, December, February, April, and Summer. The October issues correspond to the database as initially released for searching online in mid-September. The figures make apparent that the greatest part of this year's declines occurred in the December 2008 and February and April 2009 issues.

Given recent year-to-year fluctuations in the number of ads and jobs and their distribution across the *JIL*'s five seasonal issues, how well is the sample of ads in the October

issues continuing to serve as a barometer of academic employment opportunities in English and foreign languages? Figure 4 (for the English edition) and figure 5 (for the foreign language edition) show the number and percentage of tenure-track assistant professor positions announced in the October issues across the twelve years since 1997, the year that the *JIL* first became available electronically. While the numbers of ads (and jobs) announced in October have declined in recent years, the percentage values have remained more stable, and the stability of the percentage values attests to the continued usefulness of the October issues as samples of ads and a barometer for assessing trends.

Analysis of the full-year databases also reveals notable stability in the percentage share—as distinct from the number—of ads indexed as tenure-track and for the rank of assistant professor, including this year (2008–09). Figure 6 (for the English edition) and figure 7 (for the foreign language edition) show that these percentages have averaged between 65% to 70% for English and 50% to 55% for foreign languages, including ads marked for tenure-track assistant professor and some other rank along with ads marked only for tenure-track assistant professor. In the *JIL*'s foreign language edition, the percentage of ads indexed for tenure-track and assistant professor is actually higher so far this year, 62.7% in 2008–09 through February, up from 51.0% of all ads in 2007–08. The increased percentage share of ads indexed as tenure-track is one indication that cutbacks are affecting hiring to full-time non-tenure-track positions (at least those that seek candidates from a national pool through the *JIL*) even more severely than to tenure-track positions. Since ads in the February, April, and Summer issues announce greater numbers of non-tenure-track instructor positions, it is reasonable to expect that the year-to-year discrepancy will grow smaller by the time the *JIL*'s year ends in July.

Figure 8 (for the English edition) and figure 9 (for the foreign language edition) show the gradual increase in the number of ads in the different categories of rank and tenure status over the years 2004–05 to 2007–08—and the dramatic decline this year. These data support the conclusion that, as sharp as cutbacks in hiring to tenure-track positions are, cutbacks in full-time non-tenure-track positions have been even more severe, at least for those non-tenure-track positions advertised in the *JIL* and filled from a national pool of candidates, especially by foreign language departments.

The other chief variable in the intense competition for faculty positions in modern languages, of course, is the number of doctorate recipients graduating each year. The Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), the federally sponsored census of new graduates from doctoral programs in United States universities, has provided an annual count of degree recipients since 1958. As reported on the 2007 SED, in 2006–07 905 students earned doctorates in English and 604 in foreign languages—down from 954 and 614, respectively, in 2006. For the past seven years the production of doctorate recipients has fluctuated in a range between 900 and 980 for English and 580 and 630 for foreign languages ("Table 2").

Figure 10 (English) and figure 11 (foreign languages) compare the number of English and foreign language doctorate recipients reported on the SED from 1975 to 2007 with the number of placements to tenure-track assistant professor positions reported on the twelve placement surveys the MLA has conducted since 1977. With departmental response rates of 95% or better, each MLA placement survey can be regarded as a census of placement for doctorate recipients in the year they receive their degrees. The placement surveys suggest a

higher education system prepared to absorb about 400 new English doctorate recipients and about 280 new foreign language doctorate recipients to tenure-track positions in any given year, plus or minus 50 to 100 tenure-track placements as conditions have improved or worsened. Placements to tenure-track positions constitute only part of all the employment placements, including academic placements, that new doctorate recipients obtain. On the most recent MLA placement survey, close to 90% of graduates were employed in higher education, between a quarter and a third in non-tenure-track teaching positions, either full- or part-time (Steward).

As noted above, the placement information provided by the MLA placement surveys is limited to the year in which graduates receive their degrees. Findings from a survey of hiring departments that the MLA conducted in 2004 give quantitative specificity to what is common anecdotal knowledge and also what the data on placement to non-tenure-track positions clearly imply: that many graduates from modern language doctoral programs are candidates for tenure-track assistant professor positions for several years after the year in which they receive their terminal degrees. Figure 12 (for English) and figure 13 (for foreign languages) show the year in which candidates who were hired to tenure-track assistant professor positions received their degrees. Of candidates hired to start appointments in fall 2004, considerably fewer than half (34% of those hired by English departments and 41% of those hired by foreign language departments) received their degrees in the academic year 2003–04; 39% (English) and 36% (foreign languages) received their degrees in one of the previous three years; and 26% (English) and 20% (foreign languages) received their degrees in 2000 or before.

The 2004 survey also asked departments about the prior employment situations of the candidates they hired (Laurence). Figure 14 and figure 15 show the findings for English departments and foreign language departments, respectively. Significant percentages of those hired to tenure-track assistant professor positions already held a tenure-track position at another institution—19% of the candidates hired to positions in English and 16% of the candidates hired to positions in foreign languages.

Figure 16 (English) and figure 17 (foreign languages) show trends in the percentage of jobs in different specialty areas in the October issues from 1985 to 2008. British literature, at 20.0%, remains the English specialty area with the highest percentage of advertised positions, while Spanish, at 33.0%, remains the foreign language specialty area with the highest percentage of advertised positions. For the third year in a row (and only the third year in a decade), positions in Spanish claimed less than 40% of the positions in the October foreign language list. The declining share of jobs in Spanish suggests how positions are being distributed across a more diverse array of language areas. Positions in French claimed 13.0% of the October 2008 foreign language edition. Positions in rhetoric and composition claimed 17.0% of all jobs announced in the October 2008 English edition. The percentage share of positions in creative writing has doubled since 1990, approximately from 5% to 10% or more of all positions in October; creative writing positions claimed 11.0% of all positions in this year's October English *JIL*.

Ads for Arabic and Chinese have both increased notably since 2000–01. In 2000–01, 7 ads were classified for Arabic for the entire year, out of a total 1,379 ads in the foreign language database. In 2007–08, out of the 1,522 total for the year, 47 were classified for Arabic. This year, 38 of the 978 foreign language ads received to date are classified for Arabic.

So far this year, 50 of the 978 ads in the foreign language database are classified for Chinese. The 50 ads classified for Chinese this year compare with 85 ads for the entire year last year and 31 ads for the entire year in 2000–01.

David Laurence

Works Cited

Laurence, David. "Report on the MLA's 2004 Survey of Hiring Departments." *ADE Bulletin* 138-139 (2005-2006): 95–102. Web. 9 Mar. 2009.

Steward, Doug. "Placement Outcomes for Modern Language PhDs: Findings from the MLA's 2003–04 Survey of PhD Placement." *ADE Bulletin* 141-142 (2007): 75–102. Web. 9 Mar. 2009.

"Table 2: Major Field of Study of Doctorate Recipients for Selected Years, 1977–2007." *Survey of Earned Doctorates 2007 Selected Data Tables*. NORC, U of Chicago, n.d. Web. 9 Mar. 2009.

Fig. 1. Total Number of Positions Advertised in the *JIL*, 1975–76 to 2008–09

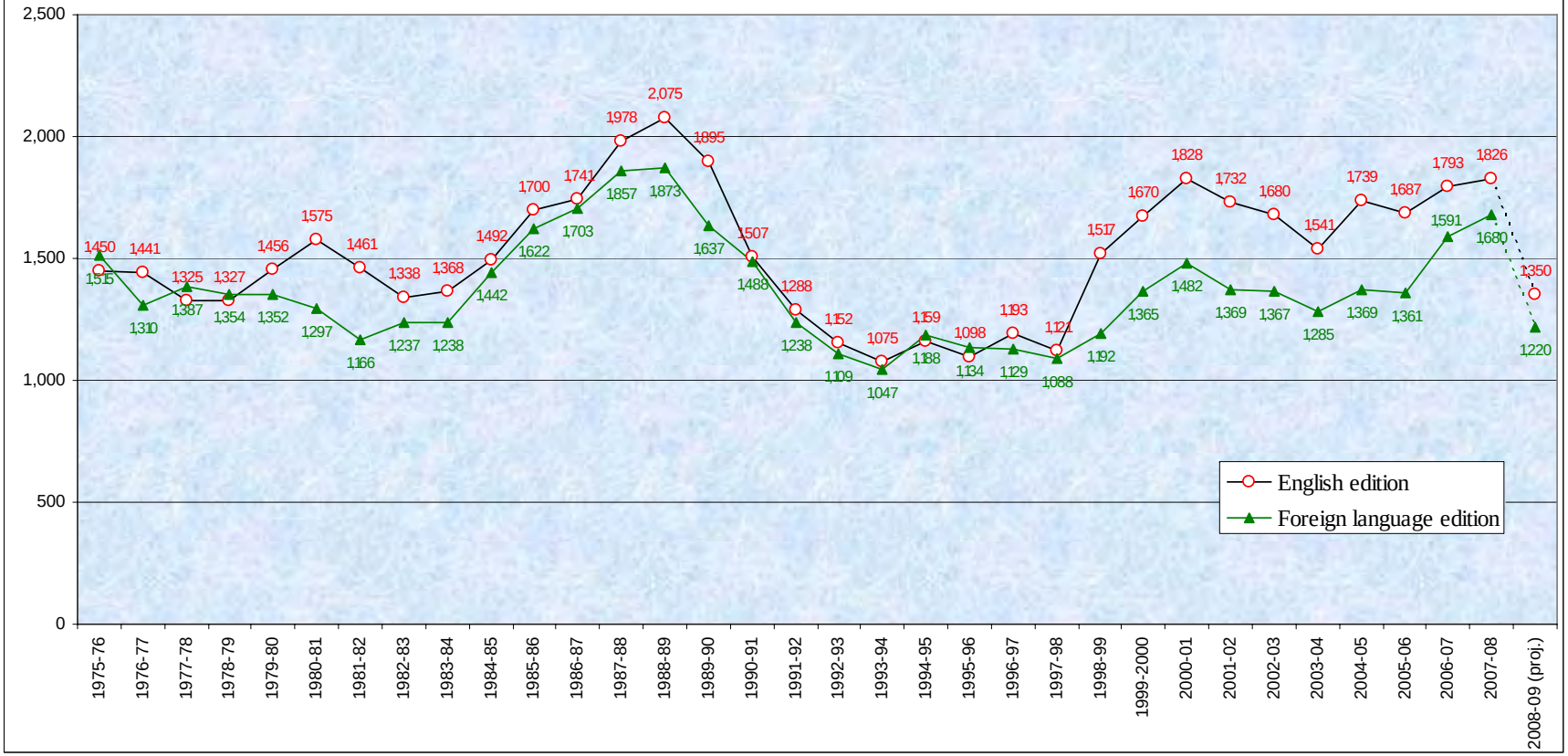


Fig. 2. Trends in the Number of Positions Advertised in the Five Seasonal Issues of the English *JIL*, 1975–76 to 2008–09

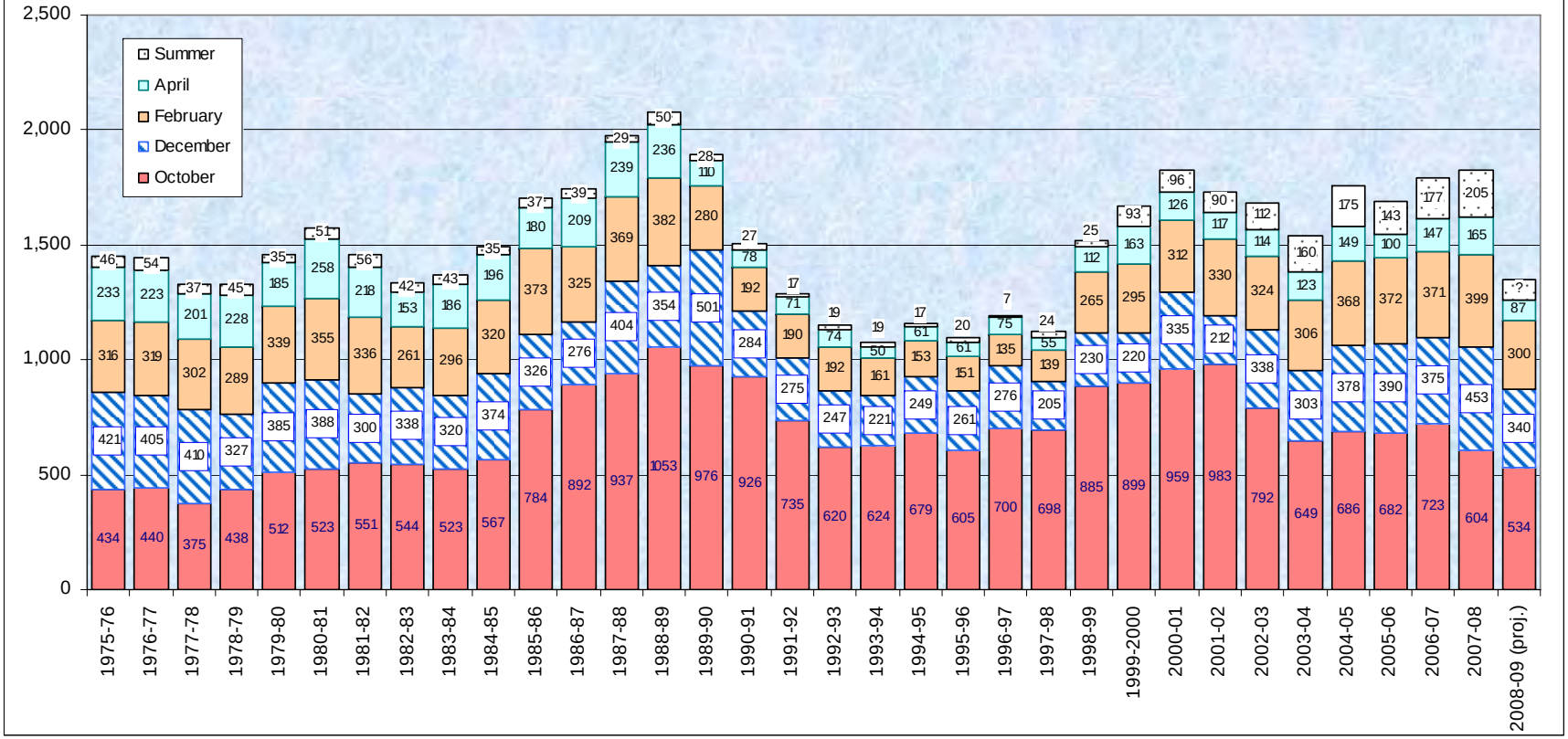


Fig. 3. Trends in the Number of Positions Advertised in the Five Seasonal Issues of the Foreign Language *JIL*, 1975–76 to 2008–09

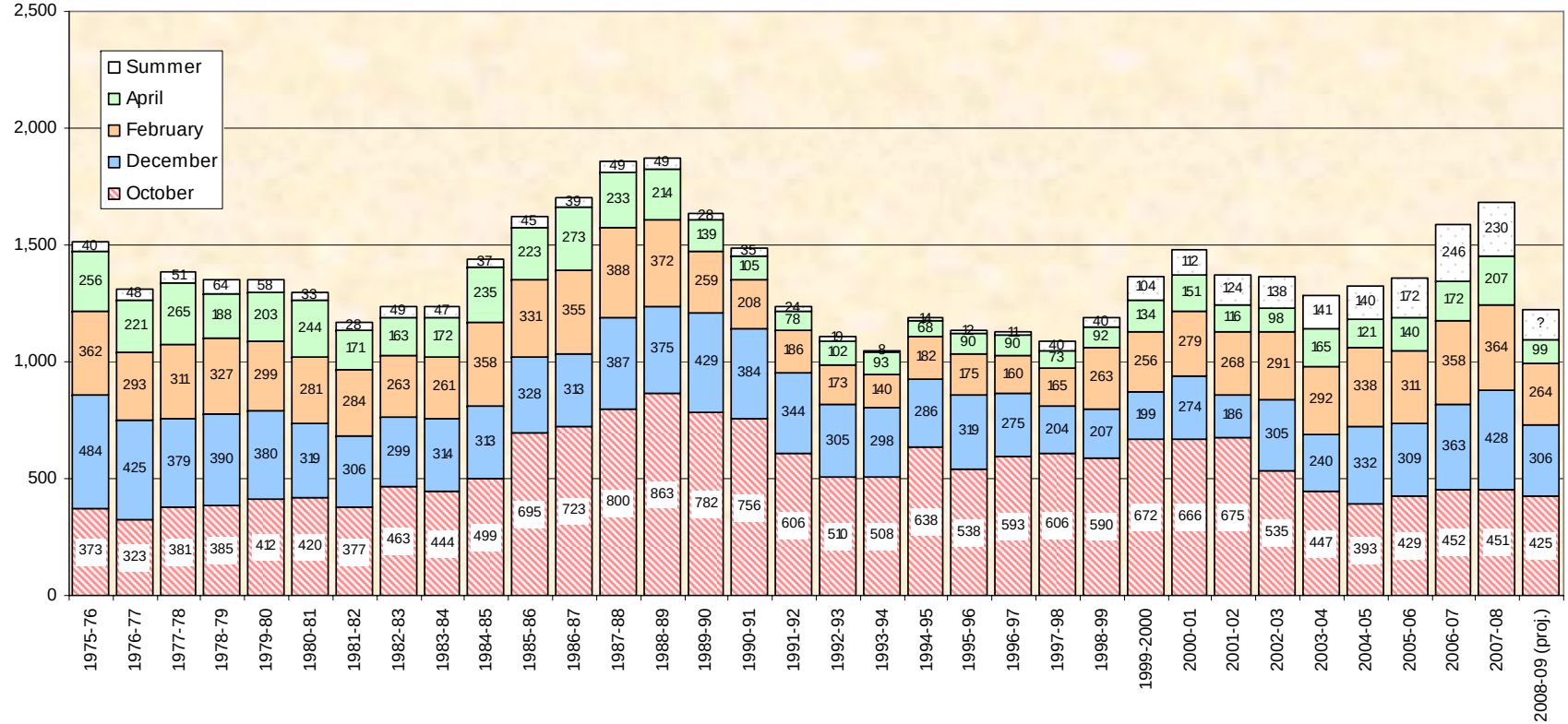


Fig. 4. Tenure-Track Assistant Professor Positions, October *JIL*, English Edition, 1997–2008

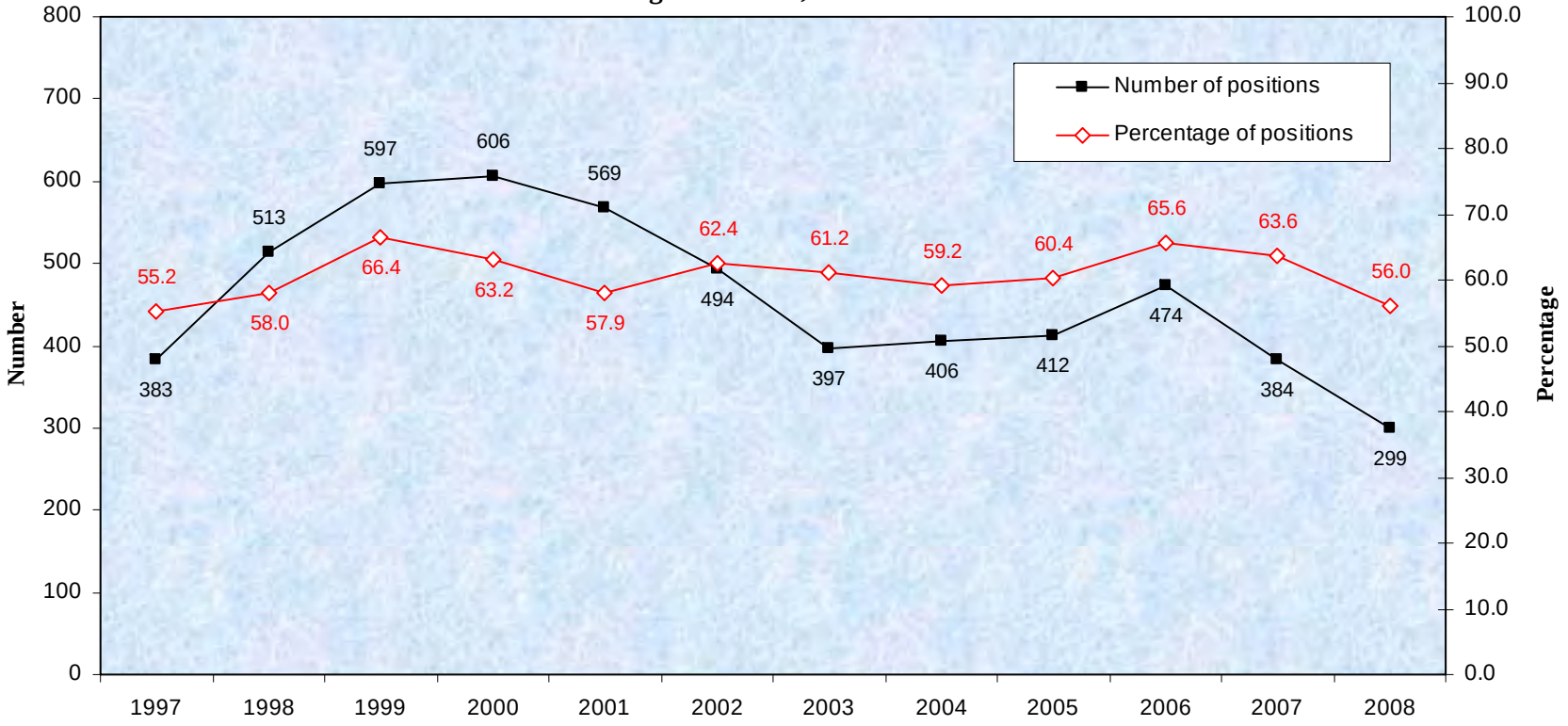


Fig. 5. Tenure-Track Assistant Professor Positions in the October *JIL*, Foreign Language Edition, 1997–2008

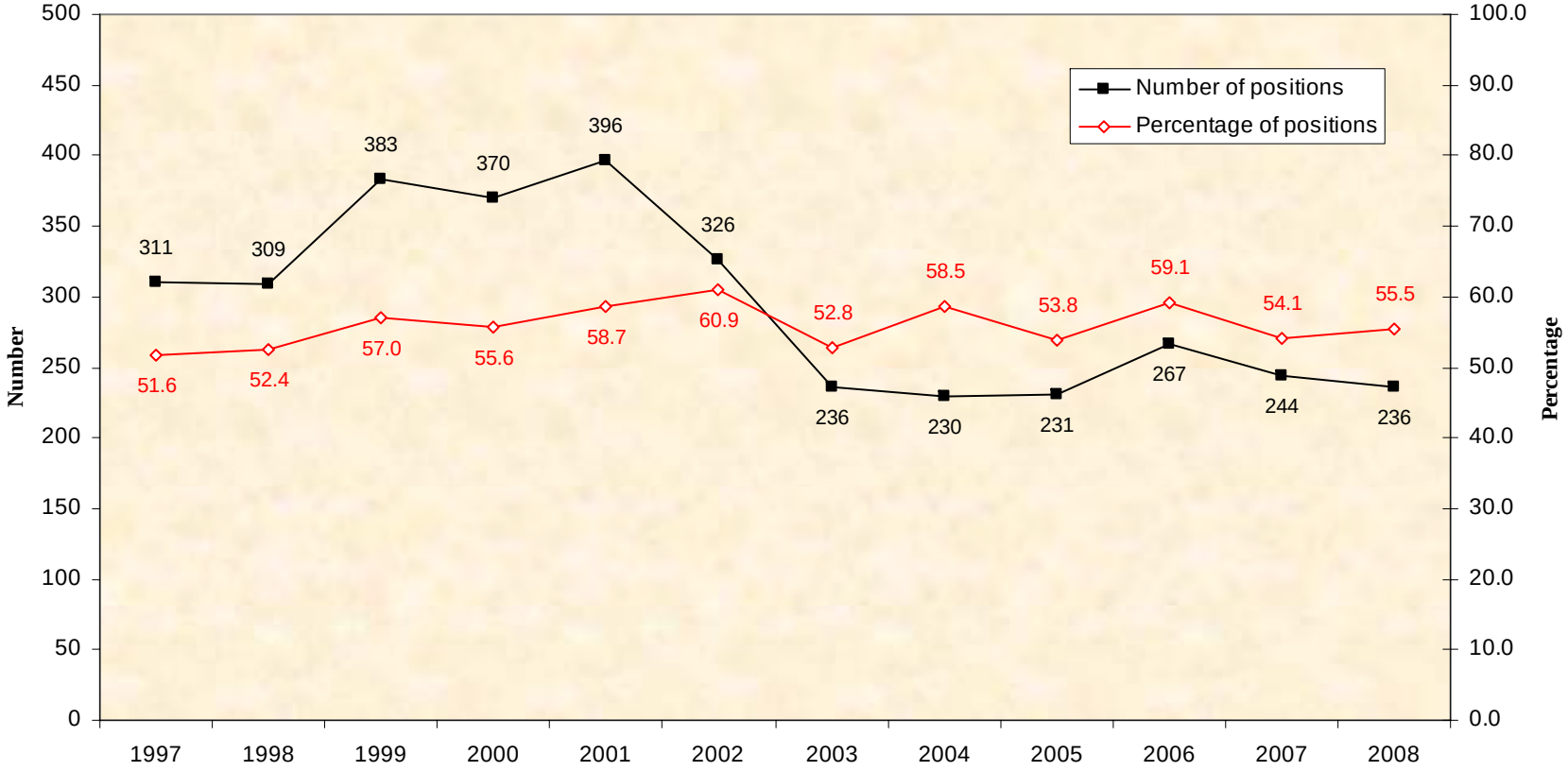


Fig. 6. *JIL* English Edition,
Percentage of Ads, by Tenure Status and Rank, 2004–05 to 2008–February 2009

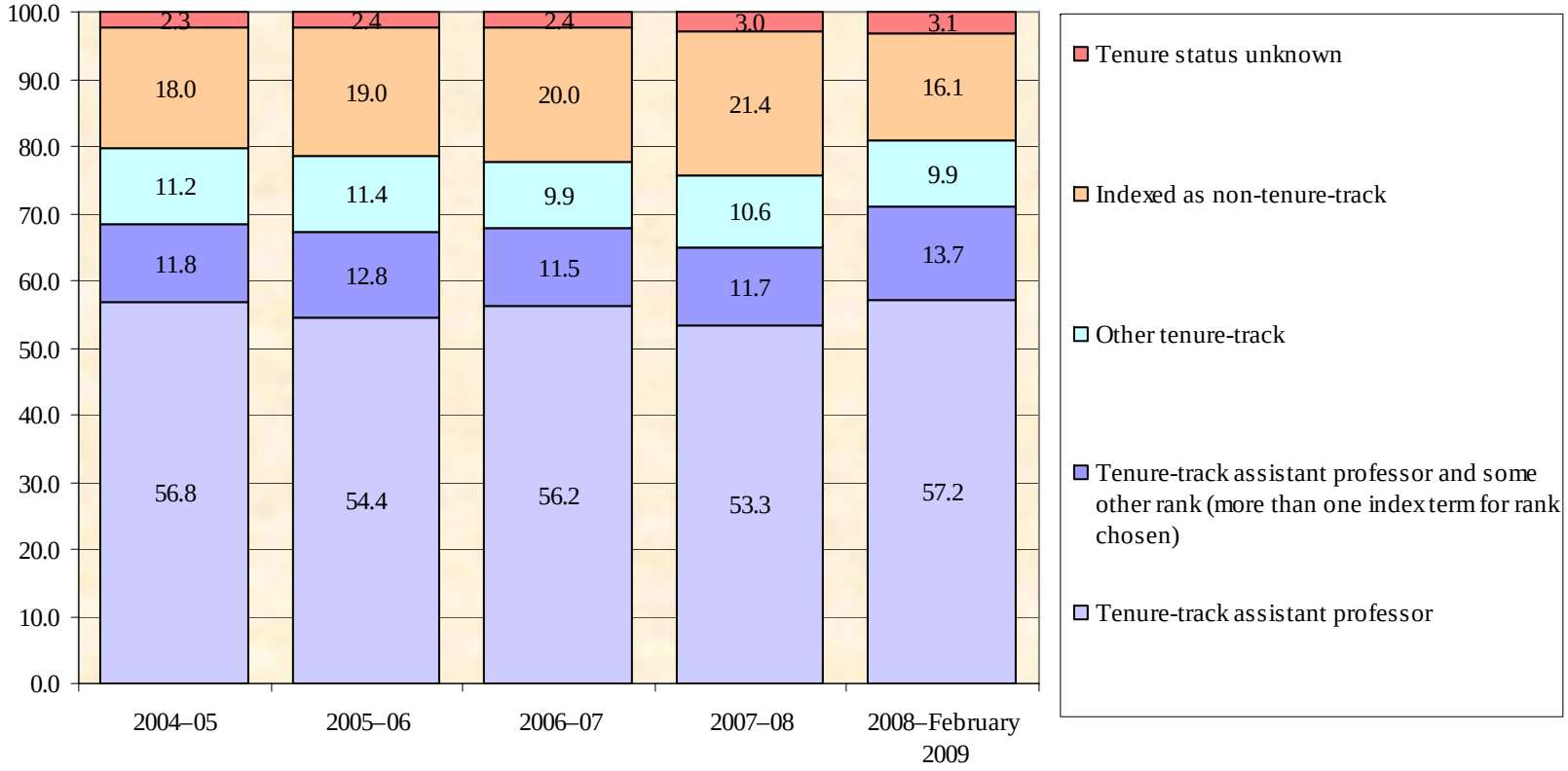


Fig. 7. *JIL* Foreign Language Edition,
Percentage of Ads, by Tenure Status and Rank, 2004–05 to 2008–February 2009

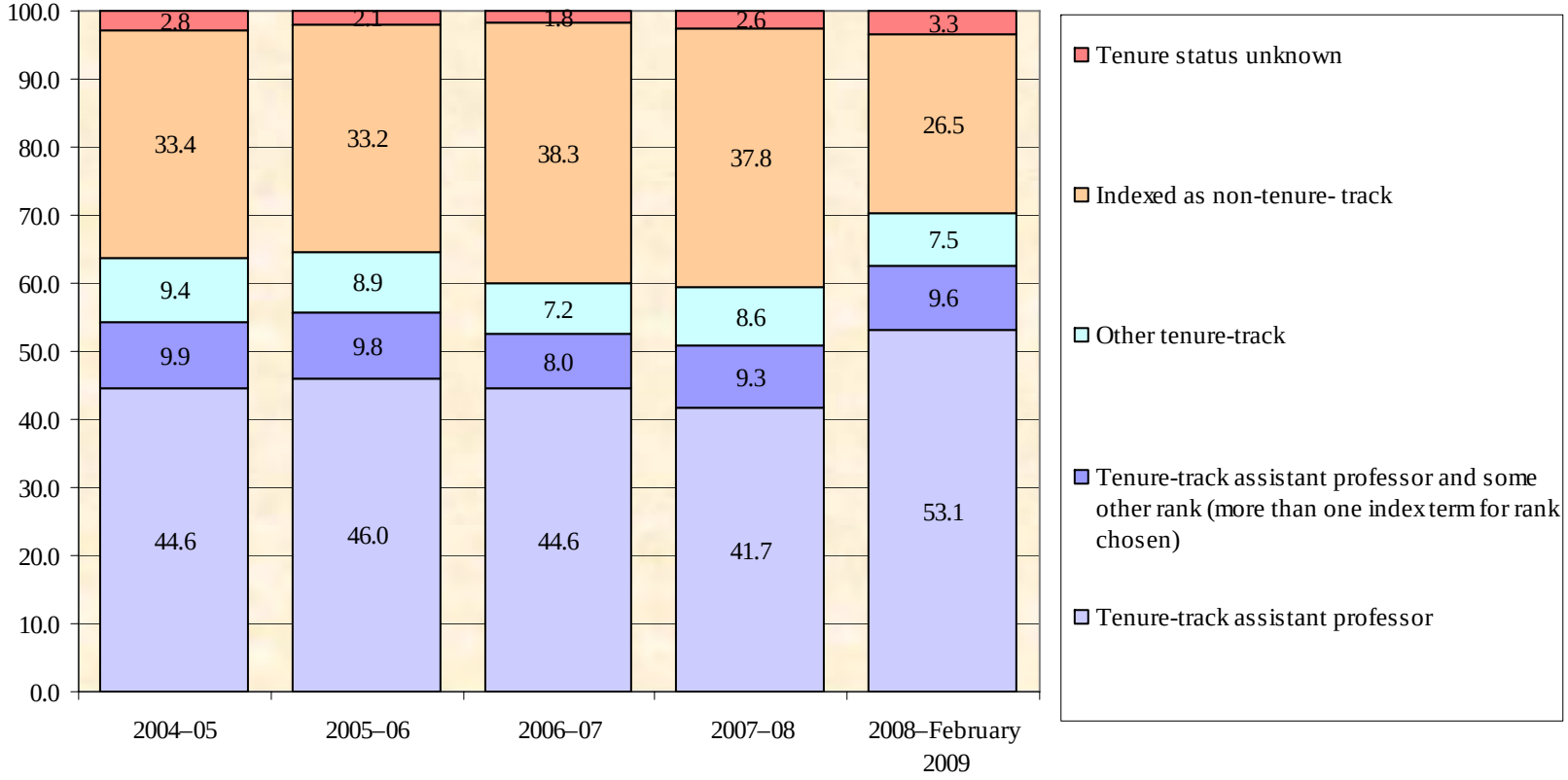


Fig. 8. *JIL* English Edition,
Number of Ads, by Tenure Status and Rank, 2004–05 to 2008–February 2009

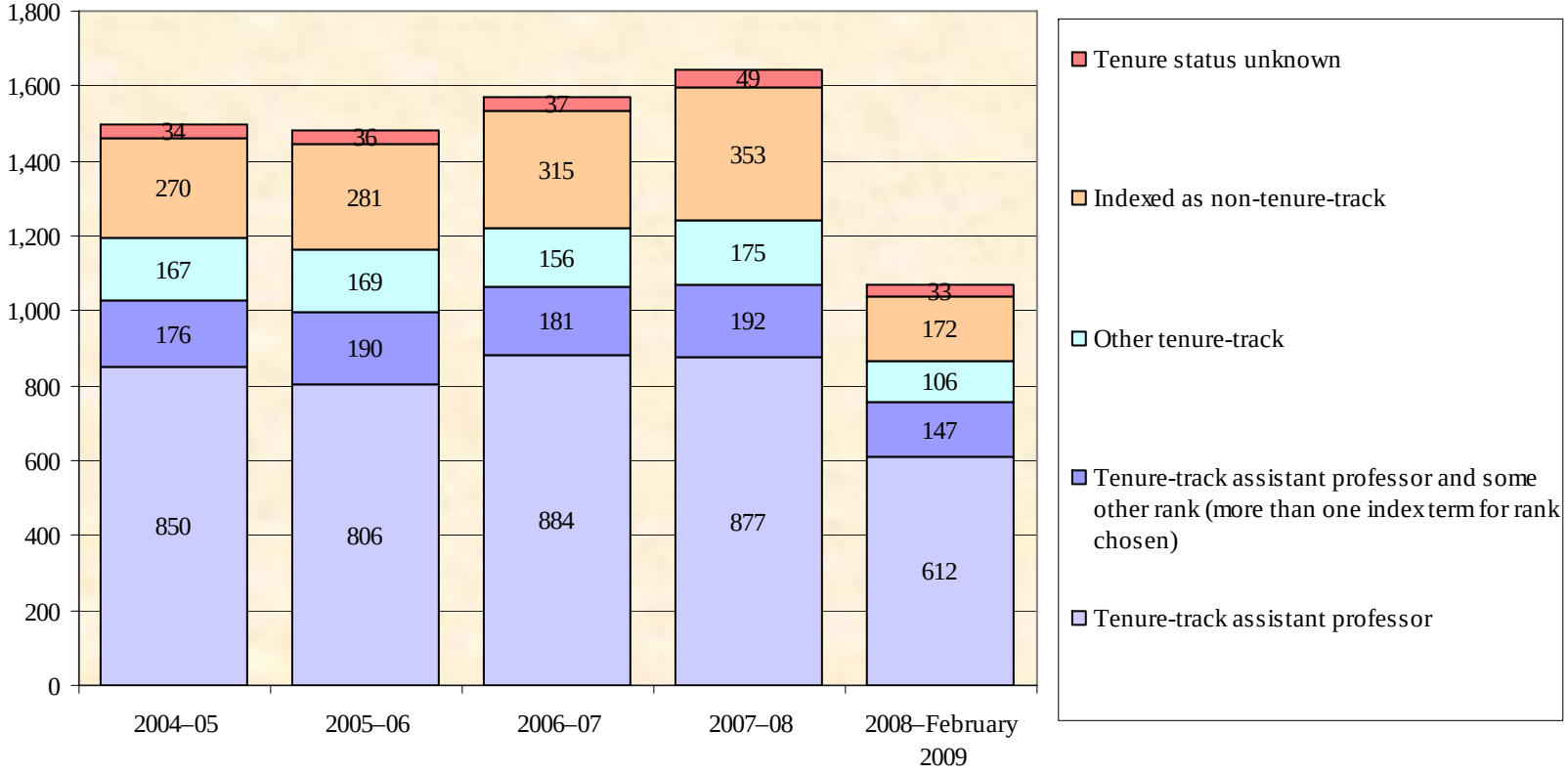


Fig. 9. *JIL* Foreign Language Edition,
Number of Ads, by Tenure Status and Rank, 2004–05 to 2008–February 2009

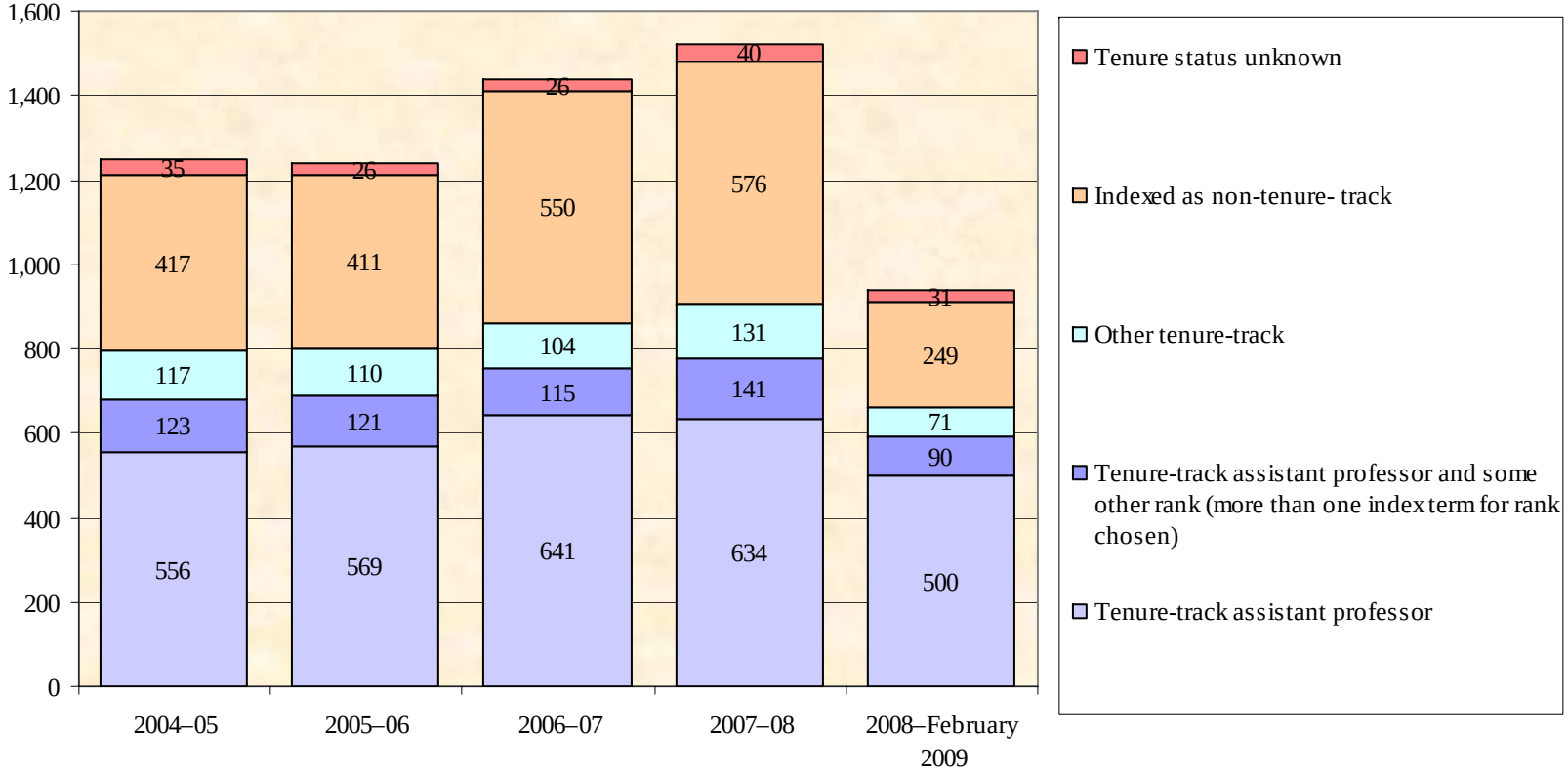
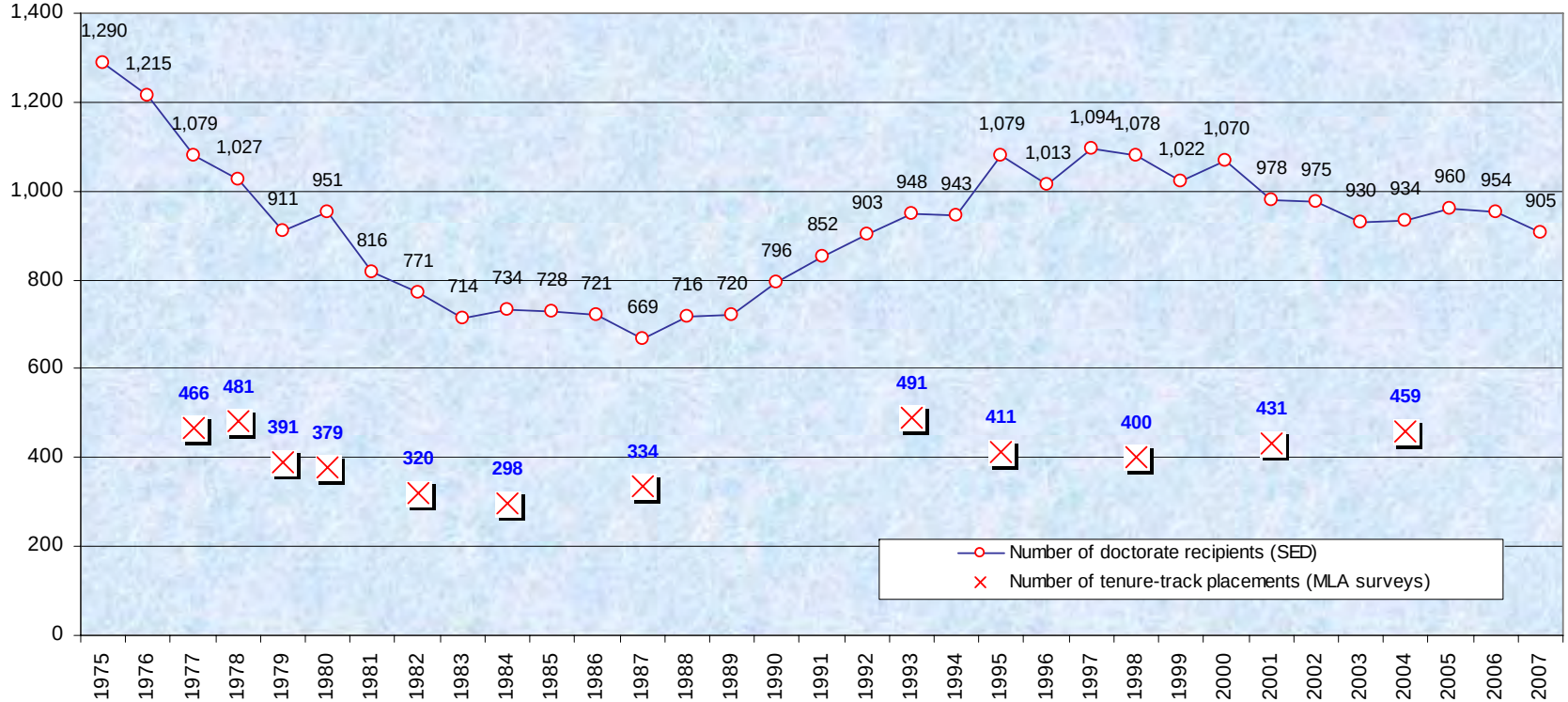
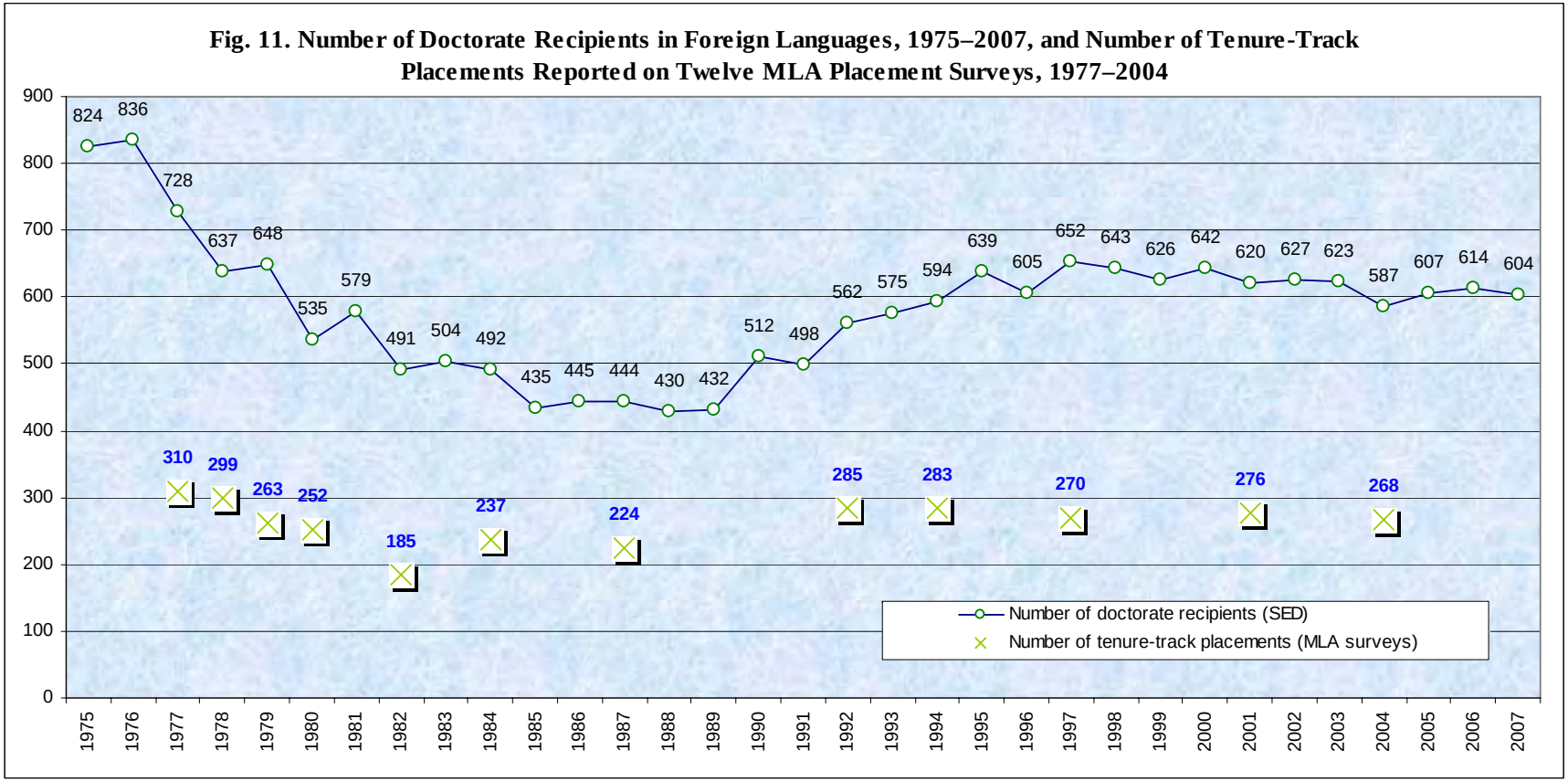


Fig. 10. Number of Doctorate Recipients in English, 1975–2007, and Number of Tenure-Track Placements Reported on Twelve MLA Placement Surveys, 1977–2004

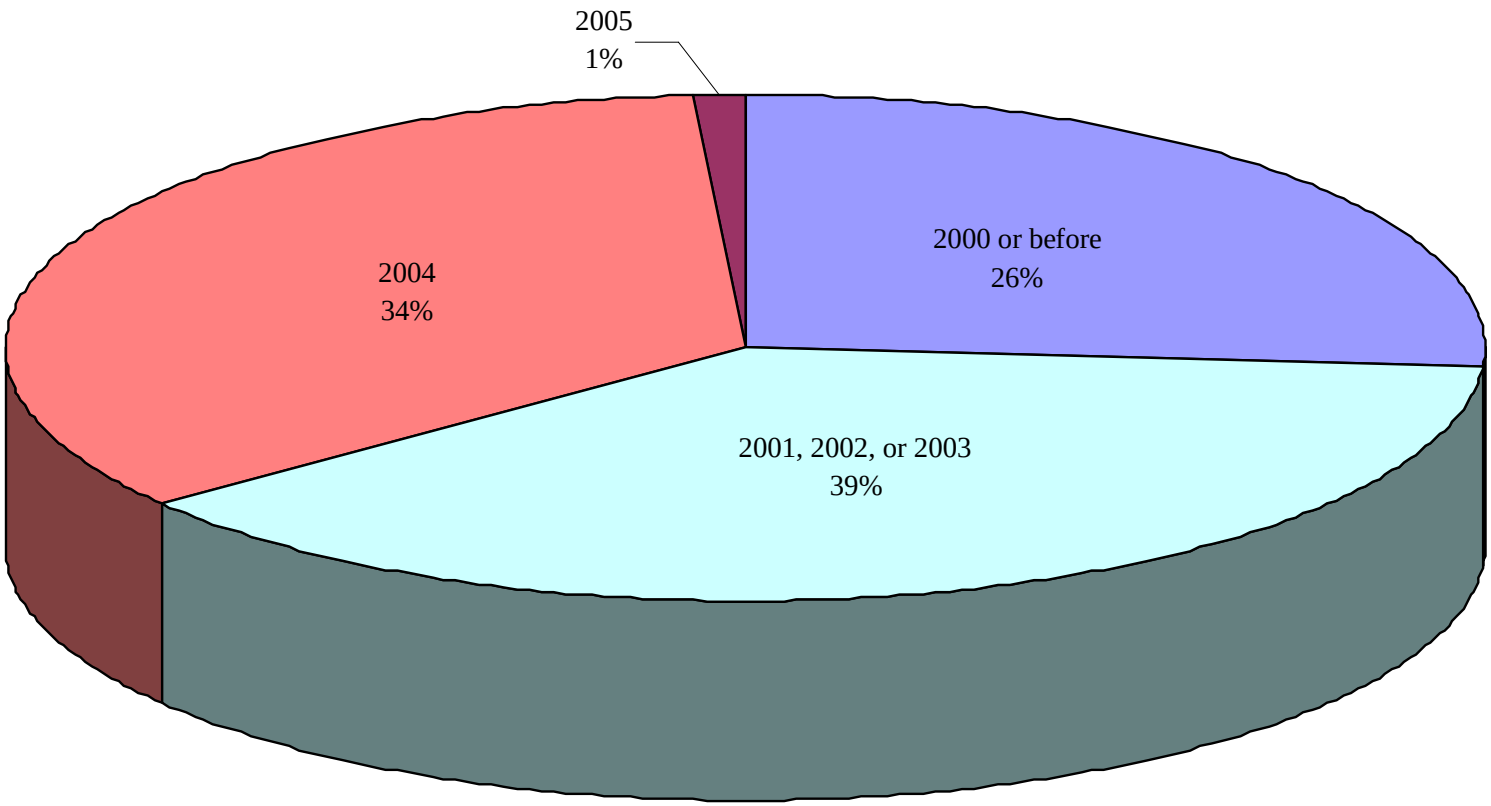


Source: Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) and MLA surveys of PhD placement



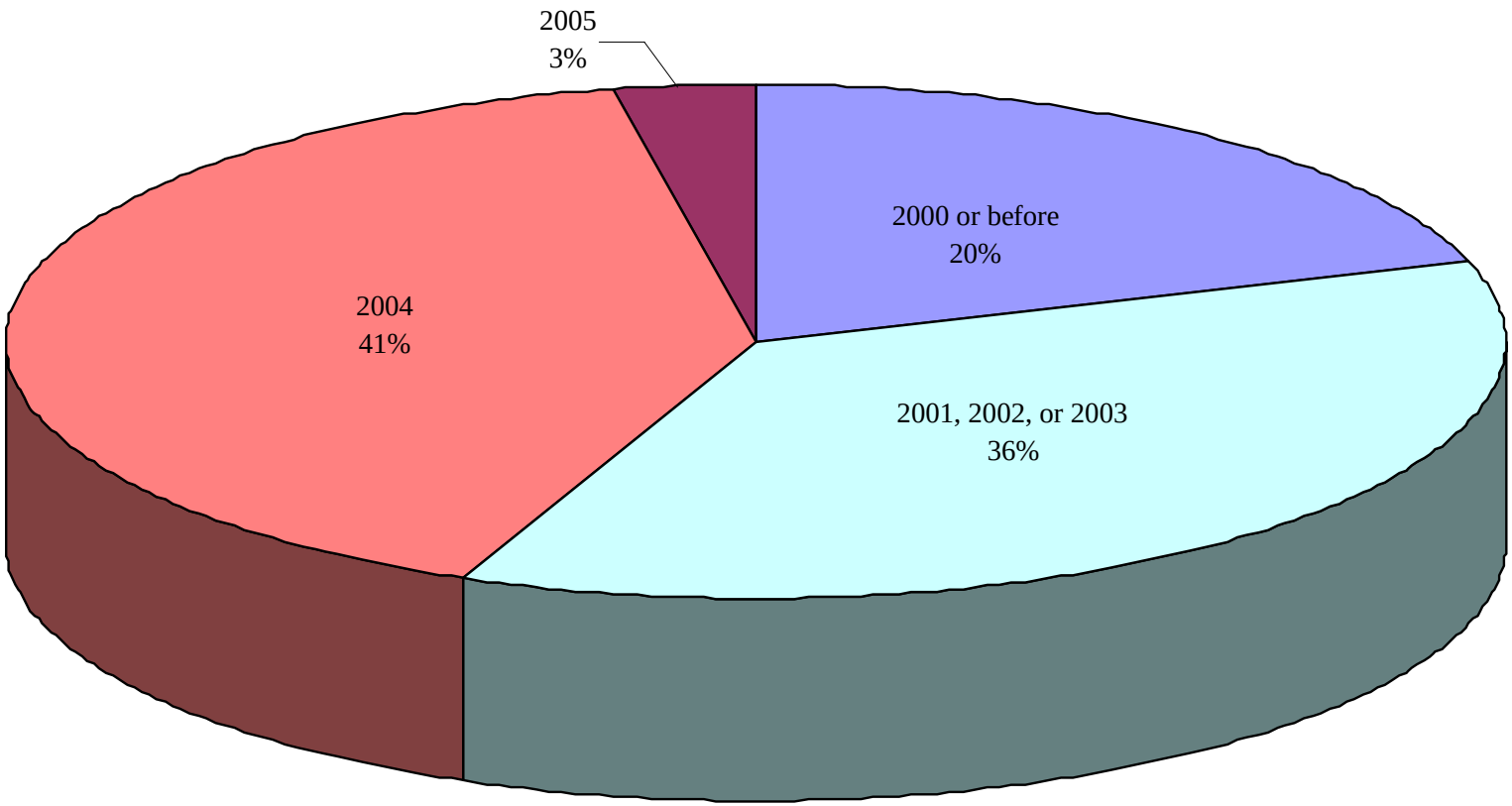
Source: Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) and MLA surveys of PhD placement

Fig 12. Year in Which Candidates Hired to Tenure-Track Assistant Professor Positions by English Departments That Advertised in the 2003–04 *JIL* Received Their Terminal Degrees



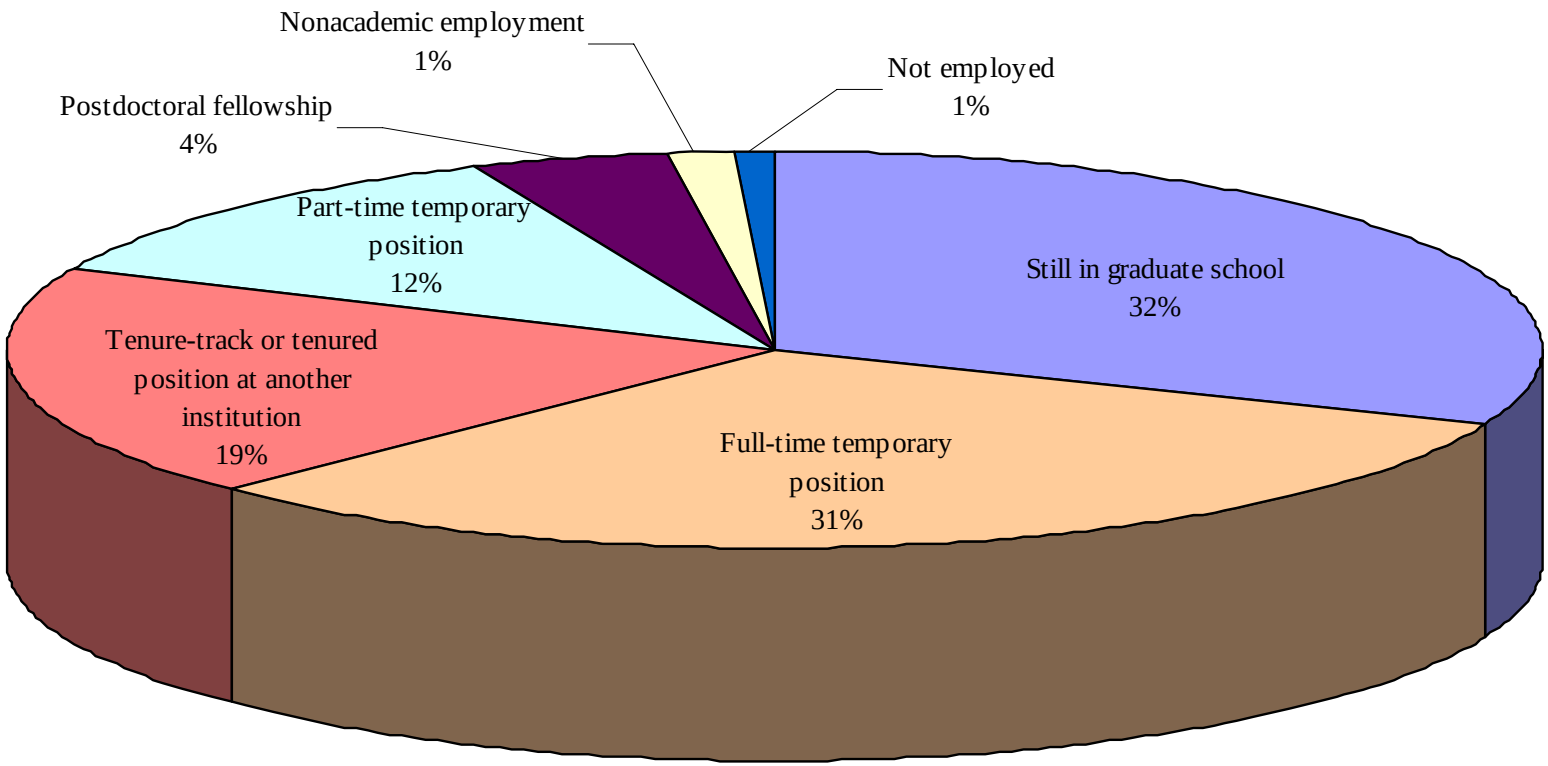
Source: Fall 2004 MLA survey of hiring departments

Fig. 13. Year in Which Candidates Hired to Tenure-Track Assistant Professor Positions by Foreign Language Departments That Advertised in the 2003–04 *JIL* Received Their Terminal Degrees



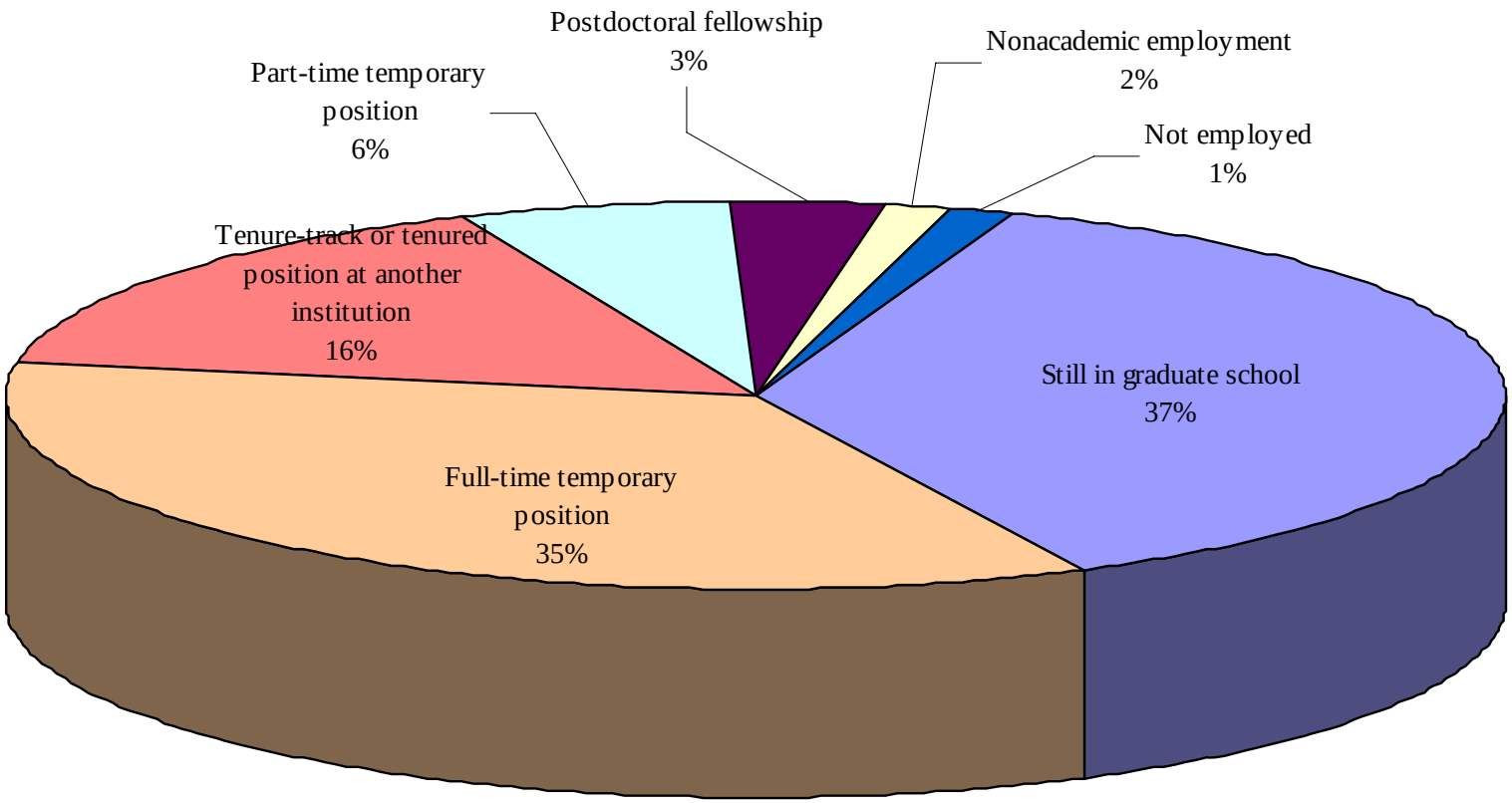
Source: Fall 2004 MLA survey of hiring departments

Fig. 14. Prior Employment Situations of Candidates Hired to Tenure-Track Assistant Professor Positions in English in 2003–04



Source: Fall 2004 MLA survey of hiring departments

Fig. 15. Prior Employment Situations of Candidates Hired to Tenure-Track Assistant Professor Positions in Foreign Languages in 2003–04



Source: Fall 2004 MLA survey of hiring departments

Fig. 16. Percentage of Positions in the October English *JIL* in Five Specialty Areas, 1985–2008

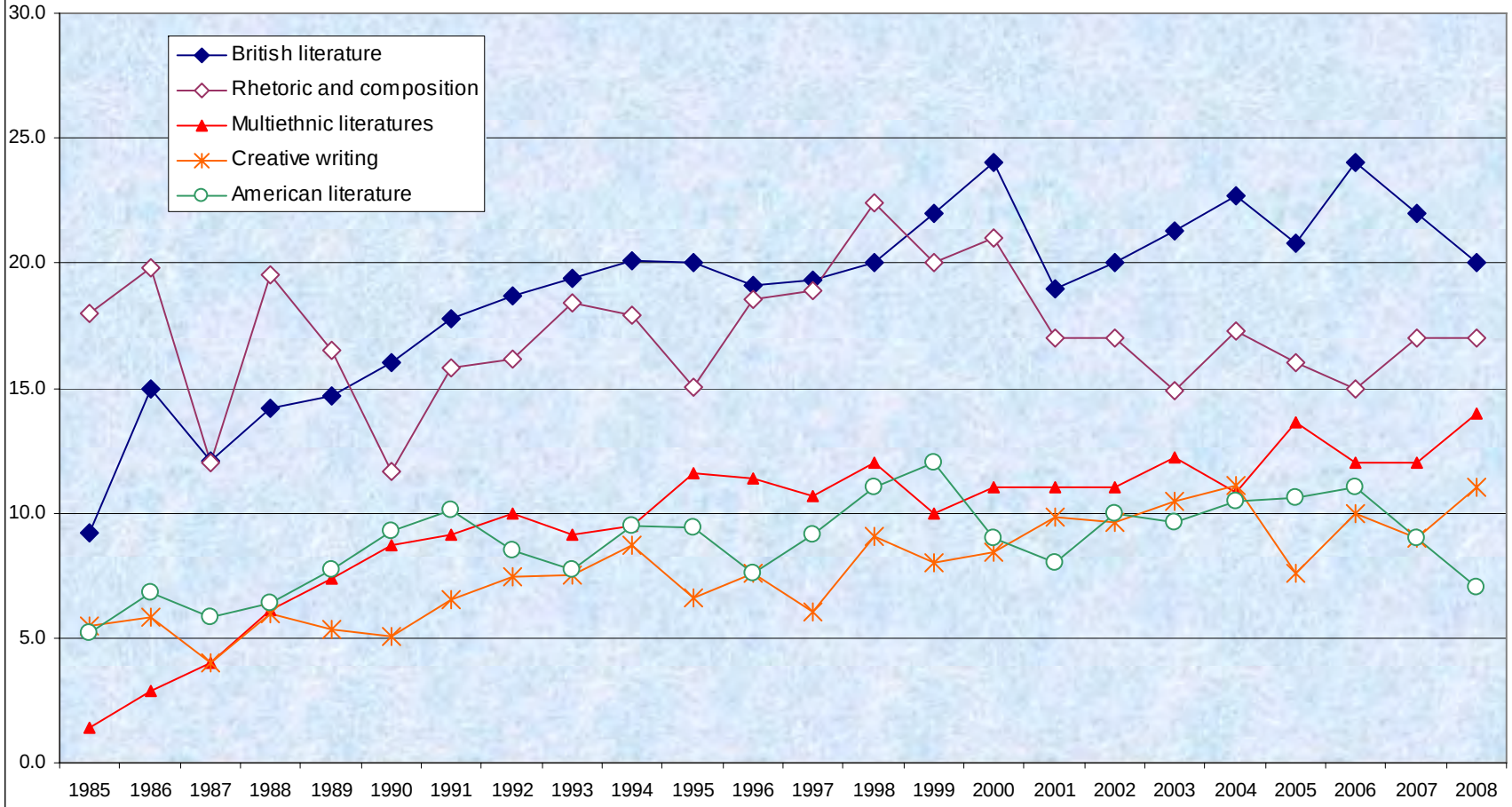
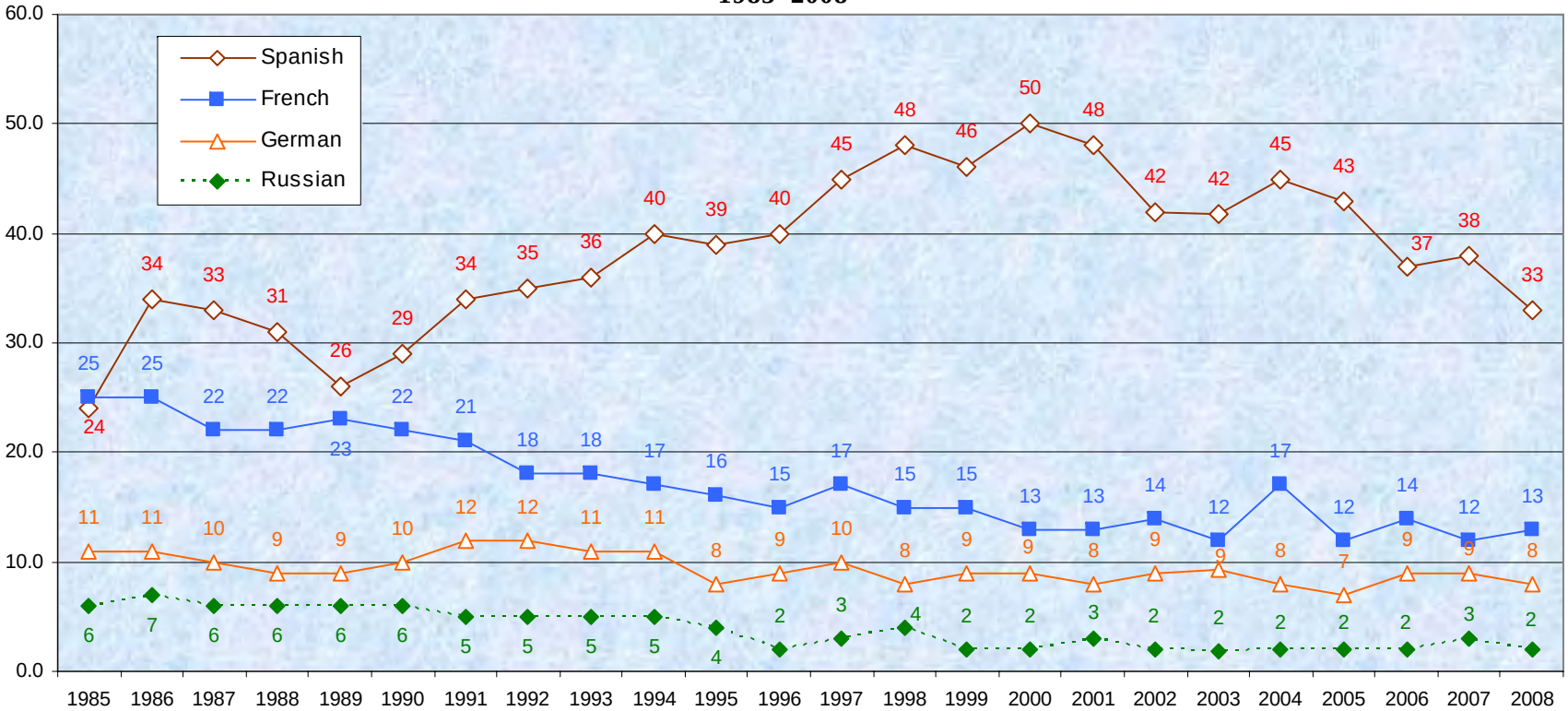



Fig. 17. Percentage of Positions in the October Foreign Language *JIL* in Four Language Areas, 1985–2008