GCE

English Language

Advanced GCE **A2 H469**

Advanced Subsidiary GCE **AS H069**

OCR Report to Centres June 2014

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Advanced GCE English Language (H469)

Advanced Subsidiary GCE English Language (H069)

OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

F651 The Dynamics of Speech

General Comments

Centres and candidates were generally well-prepared for the demands of this paper, which requires sound knowledge of concepts and theories of spoken language and a readiness to apply this knowledge carefully to the transcription data offered in all of the questions.

As examiners noted last year, there is an increasing trend for candidates to apply a very similar (or indeed identical) approach in both Sections of the paper, working systematically through a prepared list of categories. This is often apparent in the structure of an answer, where each paragraph will announce its agenda: "Lexically, this interaction … In terms of grammar, the participants … The pragmatics … " Such an approach may become comfortable for candidates through their preparation for the examination; it may have the virtues of providing a workable structure and a mental 'check-list'.

The best answers, however, were those which were flexible to the demands and opportunities of the data provided. Examiners were encouraged when they saw answers in which candidates had changed their mind on closer investigation of the evidence. Such an answer might have begun (for example) with categorical assertions that such-and-such an interaction was clearly competitive because the participants overlapped each other; but the examiner was then able to reward the ways in which the candidate subsequently worked her/his way to a more flexible understanding as she/he analysed specific examples of language use and realised that the data suggested a more complex and shifting reality.

So flexibility of approach in responding to the data presented is crucial in improving performance. Similarly, the two different Sections of the paper require a more precise focus than some candidates applied. The title of the Unit is of course "the dynamics of speech", and careful informed attention to these dynamics will always be the touchstone for successful performance. Further guidance is given by the titles of the Sections – Speech and Children, and Speech Varieties and Social Groups – and more direction still is indicated by the individual question-wordings. For example, Question 3 invited candidates to "Discuss how the speakers use language here to share their experiences".

The detailed published mark-scheme indicates a range of potentially fruitful approaches for each question. No mark-scheme can ever anticipate the entire range of response, and candidates were of course rewarded for any informed application of relevant skills and knowledge.

Comments on Individual Questions

Section A: Speech and Children
Many more candidates answered Question 1, which was based on an interaction between a mother and her daughters Leonie (aged 3 years and 3 months) and Romana (14 months old), than Question 2, a transcription of a conversation involving a group of thirteen-year-olds discussing concerns about weight and diet.

Question 1
The most successful answers revealed:
- understanding of a wide range of features of Child-Directed Speech – often referred to as 'mother-ese' – and in particularly the use of rising and falling intonation
- ability to refer with accuracy and in relevant ways to traditional' theorists such as Skinner, Bruner, Vygotsy, Chomsky and Piaget
- informed understanding of Aitchison's Labelling/Packaging/Network-Building theories, of Halliday's theory of Language Functions, and productive application of these
- the ability to start with the evidence and build up a reading, rather than distorting the evidence to fit a prepared theory
- careful reading of the transcription data – it is easy to mis-attribute an utterance and thus go astray in the analysis

Romana's efforts to pronounce "fish" provided candidates with the opportunity to look at a child in the holophrastic stage alongside one who is more linguistically developed. The most common misconceptions were of Leonie's "whats she say"', which was generally interpreted as 'incorrect' for 'what is she saying'. Though discussion of this instance was at times laboured, it still provided a chance to discuss key constituents of language (AO3) that might apply. Similarly, the fact that Leonie omits a determiner from 'YES (1) monkey' and 'where is baby tiger' offered a chance to discuss the order in which elements of language are acquired by children. Since the transcription showed the mother actually joining in with the play as opposed to simply observing and commenting, candidates were able to discuss the 'caretaker' role and to cite Halliday's imaginative function.

Question 2
It is an established feature of candidate behaviour in many examinations that, given two alternative questions, more will select the first simply because it is the first. Certainly, examiners saw very few responses to this question. It may be that Centres are preparing candidates to answer questions on language acquisition in young children rather than covering the range in the Unit content of the Specification.

It may be helpful therefore to remember that the F651 Unit content specifies "spoken language generated by and for children and young people up to the age of 14" and includes "the social contexts of talk and children, children's language in use (child-child and child-adult) and children's language in the media and in the wider community".

Whatever the reason for the low take-up of this question, there were some close analyses which worked with some skill through each turn of the conversation.

The most successful answers revealed:
- an appreciation that the focus of the question was how the speakers use language to interact with each other and share their concerns
- careful reading of the transcription data, and care not to jump to conclusions based on knowledge of 'gender' or 'dominance' theories
- a realisation that it is the male participants who ask the probing questions
- relevant discussion of accent/dialect and sociolect, based on the phonemic information in the transcription

- application of Accommodation Theory

Section B: Speech Varieties and Social Groups

Question 3
The 'Social Group' here was a loosely-defined "four young people aged 18 to 21". Some candidates made unnecessary assumptions about the context and/or applied a more-or-less inflexible 'dominance' or 'difference' model. Better answers responded to the shifts in turn-taking and overlapping, applying theories of genderlect/sociolect more tentatively and with more accurate reference to the evidence.

The most successful answers revealed:
- good understanding of topic management, co-operative overlaps and back-channelling behaviour
- appreciation that not all 'non-fluency' features are non-fluent! – for example, it's likely that Steve is deliberately pausing in lines 11 to 13 as he 'performs' for the entertainment of his friends the kind of conversation he used to have with his father
- thoughtful understanding of features of 'youth-speak' such as the over-use of 'like' as a filler or in its 'quotative' sense, the exaggerated lexis in 'totally terrified', and slang lexis ('brill')

Candidates were rewarded for logical argument based on assumptions about a speaker's gender wherever this was supported by accurate reference to the transcription data. For example, it was acceptable to argue that Nisreen's second attempt to complete the interrupted utterance beginning "my first concert .. " was a feature of typically-male determination, or to see Nisreen as being interrupted competitively by Minu, who subsequently takes and holds the floor (lines 33-35 and 37-39) for a more extended anecdote.

Question 4
Since the transcription provided for this question was from a training video designed to teach sailing to beginners, candidates realised that it was likely to be semi-planned and partly-scripted rather than entirely spontaneous. Some answers did not address the significance/effects (AO3) of its being a video for a wider audience, and these tended to be responses which did not do much more than summarise the content of the interaction.

The most successful answers revealed:
- an appreciation that the focus of the question was how language is used here by the three main speakers (Damien, Indra and Jon) to help a beginner to understand the basics of sailing
- engagement with the dynamics between participants at the same time as noting the needs of the film to engage and persuade and entertain the viewers
- some evaluation of the opening sequence of declaratives from multiple speakers
- appreciation (and some analysis) of Damien's humorous touches
- appreciation of Jon's use of jargon and imperatives giving instruction, and his praise for Indra's efforts

As Indra spoke less than the other two, theories of genderlect were introduced, though better answers argued that she was deferring to Jon as tutor rather than merely as a male.

F653 Culture, Language and Identity

General Comments:

The paper produced a varied range of responses to all questions. A number showed both detailed technical linguistic knowledge and good contextual understanding; supported by well-structured answers in both sections of the paper. In this work there was evidence of a wider knowledge of language theory and relevant debates. The more average answers were adept at summarising in detail the basic issues in the set passages in both sections of the paper. This work was more limited in detailed referential linguistic analysis; and was not supported by much evidence of wider reading. There were a minority of candidates who appeared to have had rather limited practice in organising and writing an examination answer in an appropriate academic style. The fact that candidates have fifteen minutes reading time in which to prepare should allow some preliminary mental sifting of the data they wish to include in the answers.

Comments on Individual Questions:

Question No 1 Section A Language and Speech

Most candidates seemed to be relatively comfortable with the two reading passages. The general drift of the answers could be summarised as a brief overview of passage (a) and reaction to the teaching of elocution in a primary school; followed by an abbreviated summation of the current status of RP; to some simple cohesive links between the passage and Estuarine English. There was rather less attention given to passage (b). When the second passage was addressed it was largely read as a prescriptive approach to speech. Concentration upon the formal phonemic points raised was not so evident. Only a very few scripts pointed out that elocution meant voice training and was not just a synonym for producing a particular accent. Most answers showed evidence of some basic understanding of the technical nature of speech sounds. Though the problem, experienced in past papers, of candidates having insufficient experience of listening to accentual variations, was still apparent in some scripts. Candidates are actively encouraged to find suitable ways of illustrating their answers in a question whose focus is clearly upon the actual sounds of speech. The more confident responses presented vowel quadrilaterals, examples of both RP and Estuarine sounds and linked these with some confidence to passage (a). In a minority of very creditable answers the technical illustrative features included examples of glottalisation, upspeak and yod coalescence. Passage (b) proved a good discriminator in terms of those candidates who moved beyond assertions about prescriptive attitudes and looked at the technical features of speech raised by the writer. These features were stress, intonation and rhythm. These were noted as important aspects evident in all conversational discourses. Elementary exemplification of such was given for both RP and Estuary English. This was encouraging work from candidates working at this level. Most candidates appeared to have some acquaintance with relevant authorities upon speech. Many scripts made satisfactory reference to the conflicting views about accents, drawn from generally contemporary sources.

In both sections of this question the more basic answers showed similarities with the kind of questionable approaches noted in previous reports. This can be abbreviated as a tendency to write general sociological narrative about social class and speech. Also a propensity to transgress into reiterating historical phonological debates and ideas, which were distantly removed from the contemporary focus of the set passages.

Question No 2 Section B The Language of Popular Written Texts

This was a popular question. Most responses showed a relatively secure understanding of the contextual links between popular fiction and basic science. They were able to discriminate between the narrative continuity of passage (c) and the multi-modal conventions present in passage (d). A number of candidates pointed out the potential of inter-textual references in (c) and the invention of a language in (d). The generic particulars of (c) gave some candidates the opportunity to talk about the varied configurations and settings of classic science fiction prose. They noted the in media res opening, placing a human central to a powerful extra-terrestrial event and commented that this was a good example of 'unreal reality'. This scientism was contrasted to the language of (d). In the case of this passage answers noted the more 'aggressive' nature of a threatening force and linguistic features connected to power and weaponry. Specific NP's like 'mutated races' and 'total extermination' were seen as central to the intentions of the aliens. Another major structural feature analysed in passage (c) was lexical cohesion. This was supported by reference to a number of foregrounded scientific collocations. The opening sentence was regarded as an example of anaphoric referencing. The concluding sentence as one of cataphoric referencing. Some answers discussed passage (c) in terms of being both a linear and a non-linear text. They commented that the captions surrounding the central figure copied conventions used in some aspects of comic art, whilst the linear texts at the top and bottom were interpreted as historical information, meant to guide the reader unfamiliar with the history of the aliens. The comic-derived captions surrounding the central figure were also cited as being more 'scientific' in the lexicon used to describe its awesome power. The inter-textual nature of (c) was discussed quite easily by most candidates, who were familiar with its televisual origins. This was making an effective point about symbolic capital. There were a few answers which attempted to discuss both texts as representing masculine power. This was potentially an interesting linguistic approach. The evidence from the language in (d) was less easy to attribute to specific features of gender, though this was seen as being present in some of the nouns and adjectives present in the captions surrounding the central figure. There was more tangible evidence in (c) with the authority of the male narrator (pronoun 'he') pointed out. The feminine aspect being more chemically terrifying in the NP 'witches brew'.

An encouraging aspect, evident in some of the work, was the fact that some centres appear to be giving their candidates further guidance in wider reading around the topic of Popular Fiction. The basics of such wider study enhance candidates' ability to meet the relevant assessment objective in a more critically focused way.

Question 3 Language and Cultural Production

There was some diversity in candidates' responses to this question. Some tended to offer rather general observations about modern art, often not addressing the actual linguistic features of the passages with much specificity. Others noted ideological features in (f) but produced rather tenuous examples of how these issues were constructed in the actual language used by the writer. It seemed that the exophoric matters generated in and by the passages were relatively unfamiliar to some of the candidates or that they had limited familiarity with review articles. The more focused answers were able to discuss both the form and the contents with some degree of critical attention. Passage (e) was noted as a more reader-friendly text. Several candidates made the interesting analogic link between its format and that of a blog, the evidence being that the speaking voice-pronoun 'I' was a convention which is popular in some reviewers' blogs. This device produced a more personal and increasingly critical commentary about modern art, whereas the discourse features in (f) were seen as rather more formal, especially in the nominals used in promoting a kind of political narrative. These views were challenged by some other responses, which tended to place the personal voice of (e) as one of indulgence, one which moved from considering the art under review to a general sceptical view about modernity, this view being supported by some apposite linguistic analysis of the collocations in lines 29-47 in the passage. For passage (f) these candidates responded favourably to what was to them the

more objective agenda raised in it, the essence being that the writer's language was more focused on promoting a kind of national 'identity' for art which had a more populist set of values. There were some clear analytical features observed in such responses, the opening left-branching sentence in (f) seen as a probable journalistic convention, and the verbal play upon Artangel and Archangel raising possible broader connotations. Similar discussion was centred upon the connotative effects of 'cultural landscape' and 'national conversation' and the phrasal 'freaked out'. The important feature of news mediation and the ways in which it can be received was seen as a more attractive element in the discourse pattern of this passage.

As was noted at the end of the comments upon Section B, those candidates, who had experienced some broader reading guidance upon the topic of Cultural Production, had been able to illustrate and comment upon both basic contextual and linguistic features in the passages.

Question 4 Language, Power and Identity

The majority of answers in this section focused far more on passage (h) than upon passage (g).

For the latter very few answers analysed the wide range of linguistic features included in the passage. Those who did respond to the technical language in the three bullets in this passage tended to demonstrate evidence of a rather poor comprehension of the meanings of some of the technical terminology. In most other answers to (g) candidates tended to make a brief summary of contents and then add some kind of coda about social media tending to displace the conventions of 'historic' emails, these contentions not supported by any clear linguistic evidence. The complex argument about speech and writing, also a feature in (g), was largely overlooked by candidates. Yet this is a feature across the whole Language Specification. Only a minority of responses showed how the spoken has intruded upon the written, in terms of abbreviations and the growing presence of visuals in written texts. 'Speech by other means', as raised in the final paragraphs of (g), offered a very good line for further contextual and critical comment. The potential to debate this issue was clearly a prominent feature which ran throughout the whole of passage (g). Passage (h) attracted more comment, especially relating to such NP's as 'brain-jacked', 'reward circuits' and the minor sentence 'manipulate our brains'. Further structural comments were raised upon those nouns and adjectives which signified specific aspects of digital technology. Rather fewer responses commented upon the journalistic features of the discourse ('published in a broadsheet newspaper').Those who did respond pointed out powerful declaratives, divisive pronouns – 'them' and 'us' – and the variety of pronominal, imperative and adverbial introductions to a number of sentences. There were a few candidates who raised the interesting point about binary oppositions in (h), exemplified particularly by the way the author drew attention to some of the factors concerning 'our' reactions and the 'primary tasks of game developers'. There were occasional attempts to raise issues concerning gender in both passages. Though evidence for this was extremely difficult to find and, when presented, was very limited in exemplification.

Very few answers raised the contextual links between the passages and the title of this section of the examination paper. Since there was considerable scope for candidates to draw upon their own linguistic experiences (Identity) of varieties of written English in (g) and as participants (Power/Identity) in both (g) and (h), the absence of reflective contextual comment covering all three of the constituents in the title was a surprising omission.

Where relevant, the effects of wider reading upon candidates' work has been raised. In Section B the following authorial references have been noted. The brief list which follows could be of value to centres preparing candidates for future A2 entry.

Barthes.R
Carter.R

Fairclough.N
Fowler.R
Halliday.M
Leech.G
Nash.W