

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

H470

For first teaching in 2015

H470/02 Summer 2023 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate answers is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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A Level English Language Component 2 series overview

This examined component is one of three that make up OCR's A Level in English Language. There are three questions on the paper, all of which require a response to 'unseen' texts. This component is worth 40% of the overall A Level.

The 2023 iteration of this paper featured a varied and interesting range of texts which challenged candidates to explore a range of theories and contexts, alongside focusing on language. The majority of candidates had clearly been made aware of the need to always focus on language and exploration of texts' construction of meaning.

Overall, the standard seen has covered the full range of the mark scheme, as it always has, but there have been several instances of candidates struggling either to complete the paper or to cope with the demands of each task. As noted in previous series, this is a demanding paper and some candidates seem to have been underprepared for the rigours of it. Specifically, there has been a small but appreciable rise in the number of candidates not completing, or in some cases even attempting, every question on the paper. It's not clear to examiners why this might be the case in the second, full series post-pandemic, but centres would be well advised to make sure candidates build up the stamina and knowledge required for this paper.

There remains the usual trend, across the ability range, of answering in every conceivable question order and while candidate ordering didn't correlate to marks overall, it was noticeable that those starting with the change question often – but not always – coped with that particular question better than others.

As with previous series, there were noticeable trends that recurred across the candidature, including some of last year's tendencies. As with last year's paper and as noted in last year's report, this series 'saw candidates predicting what would be found in texts and spending time outlining this in detail. This shows some knowledge of contexts but robs candidates of time to actually analyse the language itself.' 'Meanwhile' persists as a comparative discourse marker for a great many candidates and, while not technically incorrect, does suggest a less secure academic register. In a similar sense, a number of candidates suggest that theories are 'solidified by' evidence from the text or that a theory 'solidifies' the examples selected. Again, this is not necessarily injurious to a candidate's marks but is an interesting linguistic pattern seen across candidates and centres this year. Perhaps more significant was the inconsistent performance across the AOs within questions. AO3 remains the weakest overall. Many candidates discuss 'the reader' and/or 'the producer' without developing specificity drawn on knowledge of and from the text(s). The term 'deviant syntax' has seen a small rise in use and is best avoided unless candidates have a secure understanding of the term's application in stylistics when discussing internal and external patterns of use. It is very definitely to be avoided when discussing child interlocutors' language use. Alongside the tendency for candidates to write a great length – a trend noted in previous series and one which doesn't correlate with higher marks – there has also been a rise in extremely short responses that cannot move beyond Level 1 in some cases.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally did the following:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally did the following:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focused on analysing language and patterns of language use in all questions • presented ideas precisely, in depth and detail and cover a range of points • carefully selected those language features and patterns most worthy of, or amenable to, analysis • used theory to explore texts and use texts to explore theory – this 'spirit of enquiry' lies at the heart of the paper • constructed responses carefully and with clarity of structure • considered the contexts of a text 'through the lens' of its language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focused on content over language • offered assertive, narrative accounts of data without engaging with language use • presented 'undigested chunks of knowledge' with little relevance to the data • attempted to prove/disprove theory rather than explore texts through it • made sweeping generalisations and misunderstood the limitations of small, exam-based data sets • used vague terms like 'word' in place of subject terminology • offered either very little reference to contexts or made vague or ambiguous assertions about genre, audience and purpose.

Key point – 'spirit of enquiry'

As noted above and during the last series, approaching each text with *an open mind and a curiosity* about its language use has always been and will always be a successful approach. This spirit of enquiry helps candidates avoid shoe-horning irrelevant theory into responses or making implausible assertions about a complete absence of one feature or another.

Section A overview

As with all sections of this exam, depth, range and precision were the key indicators of very strong responses, and candidates would do well to approach this question in a spirit of enquiry, asking themselves why the language use may be as it is rather than attempting to fit it into the neat theoretical boxes they arrived with in mind.

This was perhaps most evident with this data. A huge number of candidates looked at Tom's age, labelled him as telegraphic, and moved on. This, of course, ignores the compelling evidence in the text for Tom's placement in the post-telegraphic stage of grammatical development. There was less of a deficit approach taken this year and this question was often the strongest response in a candidate's paper. The clarity and comparatively 'neat' links between theory and usage seem to give candidates a strong basis on which to build their responses.

Question 1

- 1 Using the appropriate terminology to explain your findings, examine the language development stage of the child-participant as evidenced in the transcript. You should identify and analyse the phonology, grammar and meaning of his utterances.

Use your knowledge of theories and concepts of child language acquisition to support your answer.

[20]

The data provided a rich source of examples which candidates used, often very well, to explore and discuss theoretical approaches. Tom's use of contractions, auxiliaries and a variety of sentence functions gave candidates an interesting range of grammatical points to make. Some candidates were able to note that Tom's use of contracted pronouns and auxiliaries could be evidence of his grammatical competence but could, equally, be learned through imitation as a single lexical unit. While this was quite rare, examiners found this to be highly sophisticated way of interpreting the data.

As in previous series, stage theory was almost universally applied but not with universal accuracy. Several candidates linked pronoun-use, question formation and negative use to Bellugi and McNeill's work, again with varying success.

In terms of meaning, Halliday and Dore were used often and effectively to engage with Tom's language use, and many strong responses were able to discuss word classes and draw links to appropriate theory. Additionally, candidates often discussed conversational theories, which were seen as valid and often well used. Very rarely, candidates looked at the use of 'desert' as a form of over-extension based on semantic features shared with a sandpit/play area in a park. This, while far from definitively true given the scope of the data, was indicative of a desire to explore the data and be open-minded in that endeavour.

As with all previous series, candidates continue to struggle when discussing phonology.

As stated last year:

'Candidates do not need to label individual phonemes precisely to engage with phonology. Rather, they can focus of the simplification processes shown (of which there were many) and engage with phonology that way.'

Candidates continue to conflate orthographical patterns in the transcript with phonemes in speech. A huge number of candidates labelled 'th' as a consonant cluster and thus labelled Tom's use of 'dis' as consonant cluster reduction. It is not, and this harmed the accuracy of some responses. In other cases, there was a strong focus on processes of substitution, gliding and fronting shown in the data and some candidates were able to label phonemes with great precision.

While the range and use of theories on this question remains impressive, candidates are best advised to understand the theories as models which may or may not apply to real-life use. There was a significant trend, as in previous years, of conflating phonology, lexis, pragmatics and everything else with grammar when trying to 'prove' or 'disprove' grammatical development, and candidates often drew links to innateness when doing so. Of all the theories applied during this series, innateness is the one that is most widely misunderstood and misapplied. Centres and candidates would do well to focus on a thorough and accurate understanding of how to apply this theory in practice.

Misconception – Virtuous Errors



'Virtuous errors' is a term to describe the errors children make when applying grammatical rules during language acquisition. Examples could include over-generalising regular plural rules to irregular nouns (man becoming mans, for example). Virtuous error should not be used as a 'catch all' term for every error a child interlocutor makes.

Exemplar 1

From Tom's age we can infer that he is likely to be in the telegraphic stage of language acquisition, perhaps cussing on post-telegraphic. There is evidence that he has a secure understanding of word meaning through his association of 'car' with 'race'. The majority of his utterances are regulatory according to Halliday's functions of language, such as 'let's play racing cars' and 'let's go to a park'; however as he is engaging in imaginative play ~~some of his~~ many of his utterances have a secondary function of being imaginative. This is made evident when he says 'the park's somewhere down the desert', which we can infer he is making up as it is unlikely that he lives in a desert. Vygotsky suggested that children use imaginative play to better their understanding of the world around them, and Tom's awareness that a 'desert' is a location highlights his firm grasp on word meaning.

The opening of this response balances the pre-conceived notion of what stage a child at Tom's age would most likely be, with the evidence of the data the candidate is seeing. In doing so, there is a tentative and inquisitive application of knowledge which suggests strong understanding and a confident handling of the data. The subsequent discussion is varied and densely packed with relevant examples and knowledge.

Section B overview

Many candidates in this series seem to have found this a particularly difficult question to engage with. Unlike the 2022 series, in which this section was a strength of many responses, Question 2 appears to have been the weakest question attempted across the paper.

More so than ever before, candidates have been drawn into discussion of content rather than language. Candidates must maintain a focus on language and patterns of language in order to address the needs of the question; there were also instances of candidates opting for a concept-led discursive style of response and, in doing so, missing the focus on language that is required.

Once again, and as stated in 2019 and 2022:

'There remain examples of candidates trying to make Grice or Goffman fit with the written text when they would be better advised to consider register, tenor and distance between producer and receiver. Often, the points were founded on a reasonable understanding of the data but were then linked to theories of limited relevance in this mode.'

This year's data is drawn from *The Guardian* website and many candidates engaged well with the UK-based context. Many accurately linked the political bias of the producer to the topic choice and representations across the text.

Question 2

- 2 Using your understanding of relevant ideas and concepts, investigate how language features and contextual factors construct meanings in this text. **[24]**

The vast majority of candidates were well-prepared for the demands of this question and maintained a focus on language use and patterns of language use as the driving aim of the task. Those that did not do this seem to have been beguiled by the topic's obvious focus on gender as an issue and this series, more than any other, saw many candidates engaging with the content and ideas rather than the language. These responses, while demonstrating a commendable social awareness, were not able to meet the needs of the question and assessment criteria. Candidates absolutely must remember to focus on language in order to prove their understanding.

In terms of context, as noted above, candidates showed some good awareness and understanding in many cases but there is still a challenge for them when moving beyond broad assertions focusing on genre, audience and purpose. In numerous responses, candidates claimed that the online nature of the article meant it was aimed at young people and then sought to make the language fit the assertion. Candidates would do well to remember that the internet has existed for, in most cases, longer than them and digital literacy is not the sole preserve of the young. This is not a new trend in candidates' assertions but is now becoming a hindrance to some otherwise strong responses.

This series saw candidates, as a result of the subject matter, drawing on gender theories as their primary route into exploring the text but this was often done at the expense of dealing with power and representations. There is perhaps a need to teach this section and approaches to it as a discrete unit at some point in the course rather than through component sociolinguistic areas. Candidates would do well to remember that any media text will rely on, and provide fruitful opportunities to discuss, power in language.

Finally, many responses struggled to spot and label the simile 'like wildfire' accurately. This was part of a broader trend of struggling to apply what could be loosely termed as KS4 terminology. Indeed, many candidates seem to have found the language of this text challenging to discuss in any precise and detailed way.

Exemplar 2

Text B arguably presents gender differences as obsolete, and it criticises the modern obsession with gender distinction. The text makes use of lexis that may typically be associated with masculinity, such as "gunshots", "everything" and "suit"; this is done in order to emphasise the absurdity of the phenomenon. This also shows a strong criticism of hyper-masculinity, which fits in with the progressive and subversive nature of the text. As well as this it contrasts this with by talking about Karunidis' daughter being dressed ~~more~~ in a more masculine way, "suit", "strong" and "androgynous". This contrast emphasises the absurdity of predicting your child's identity. Furthermore, the overabundant use of adjectives, "blue", "pink" and "atriarchal" especially aims to show readers how obsolete these ~~are~~ assigned gender differences are. Supporting this is the image of the cake with colour coded icing and toys, a typical form of a gender reveal, expresses the absurdity of this tradition, as the "girl toys" and "boy toys" are excessively distinguished between, showing how impractical it is to assign these pointless gender roles.

There is tentative language used to present well-reasoned understanding of how the producer uses language and what this might suggest about the context of production. The candidate draws on multiple examples to build a persuasive analysis and create/illustrate patterns in the producer's use of language.

Section C overview

This question was generally a strength of most responses, with candidates dealing with both data and the need to compare well. The focus of this question is always exploring and analysing language and patterns of language, using this to explore language change in contexts and drawing links to relevant concepts and theories. Most candidates clearly understood the needs of the question and were able to demonstrate that understanding appropriately; however, for the second series in a row, the focus on change itself, which is assessed under AO3 and AO4, was less than clear.

Specifically, candidates struggled to address bullet point one of AO4 which asks for the application of 'confident knowledge of appropriate linguistic concepts across both texts'. This is a synoptic unit which means a full range of concepts can be used to illuminate discussion of language change, including ideas of representation, lexical and semantic processes of change, standardisation processes and almost anything candidates are led to by the texts themselves.

The two texts were both focused on dentistry, and the topic link and genre similarities allowed a full range of apt comparisons to be made between the texts.

Question 3

- 3 By detailed analysis of the writing in both passages, discuss and illustrate the variations in language between the 19th and 21st centuries. In your answer you should explore the ways language is used in each text, as well as how contextual factors influence the way meaning is constructed.

[36]

As was noted in last year's report: 'The strongest responses were comparative throughout and focused on patterns within and between texts. They allowed the language in the two texts to guide their responses and approached the texts with an open mind, exploring the similarities and differences before attempting to account for them via contexts and concepts. In this sense, strong responses were written in triangulated paragraphs that move across the demands of the question and mark scheme to skilfully build an exploration of how the texts relate to language change.'

This remains true for this series and represents strong practice in approaching this question. The open-minded spirit of enquiry was key to interpreting this data set well. There were, for example, candidates who had learned informalisation as a theory and used the fronted co-ordinating conjunctions in Text D to 'prove' this was relevant; however, these candidates ignored the same feature in Text C. Stronger, data-led responses were able to use this as a means of questioning the relevance of the theory and to suggest possible reasons for the similarity.

Candidates would, as with every question that assesses for AO3, be well advised to consider how they approach contexts. Many candidates highlighted both the fronted conjunctions and short paragraphs of Text C as features which would 'entertain the reader'. However, these features are not themselves inherently entertaining.

Less successful responses, as was true in the last series, focused on content rather than language and struggled to compare concurrently. Overly broad assertions about context were also notable in responses which were weaker. Candidates should be commended for their knowledge of key moments in the history of language but should always think carefully about the relevance of historical events to the text in front of them.

Once again candidates across the ability range struggle to identify archaisms, and the candidature, as a whole, seemed to feel quite strongly that 'wholly' and 'seldom' were archaic rather than simply low frequency. While candidates cannot be expected to know every aspect of lexical change or, indeed, all the words of modern-day English, they may best advised to be tentative ('could be viewed as') and incline towards 'obsolete' or even 'potentially very low frequency in PDE [Present-Day English]' as a way of avoiding such issues. Equally, A Level study should come with a degree of awareness of formal written English, and a greater awareness of this would also help to avoid chasing the shadows of archaism where there are none.

Key point - Concepts

Last year's report noted that candidates would be 'better advised to consider internal and external aspects of change.' This remains true and candidates could find Suzanne Romaine's notion of internal and external change (1998) a useful way to approach texts. Romaine herself later went on to question whether this is a 'fruitless dichotomy' in variation studies, but it remains a handy framework for A Level linguists to grapple with this question. It is also usefully allied with Bex's 'Generic Labels' (1996) as means of driving discussion.

As ever, the examiner does not favour any one approach or theoretical framework.

Exemplar 3

Text C and D are linked on the topic of dental hygiene and have similar resulting lexical fields due to this. A pattern of language related to teeth is made evident in C through 'dentist', 'teeth' and 'dentific', and this is mirrored in D through word choices such as 'dental ~~tooth~~ gloss' and 'mouthwash'. As C is older it uses some examples of archaic vocabulary, such as the Latinate 'dentific' and 'dentifices' which we no longer see today. This links to the functionalist theory of language change whereby language adapts to suit the needs of its users. - we no longer have much use for words such as 'dentifices' and as a result they have fallen out of our language, ~~becoming~~ becoming archaic. By the time D was written the umbrella term 'dentifices' is no longer used and is replaced with the longer but more high-frequency words 'toothpaste, using dental gloss, and rinsing with an antiseptic mouthwash'. As D was published online it has a wide potential audience so the use of high-frequency language helps it to be accessible to as many readers as possible, on the other hand, at the time C was written those who read newspapers would typically have a high level of education, and the use of high-register Latinate lexis bordering on jargon increases the prestige of the text.

This exemplar makes a clear comparison: it picks up on salient features in the texts and explores and explains them with clarity and consistency. While it could be more concise, it is nevertheless thorough and makes points about change based on patterns of language use across the data set.

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