

English Language

Advanced GCE **A2 H469**

Advanced Subsidiary GCE **AS H069**

OCR Report to Centres

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This report on the examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the specification content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the examination.

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F651 The Dynamics of Speech

General Comments

As in previous sessions, and as might be expected, the stronger scripts were those which adopted a specifically and overtly linguistic method. And although AO2 is dominant in Section A, AO3 in Section B, there will always be significant overlap between the AOs, and a competent linguistic approach is likely to integrate aspects of AO1, AO2 and AO3 into virtually every relevant comment.

The following comments on responses in this session should provide helpful guidance to those entering in subsequent sessions. In addition, the published mark-scheme offers indications of appropriate response in terms of the Assessment Objectives.

Comments on Individual Questions

Section A: Speech and Children

In Section A, roughly equal numbers of candidates answered Question 1, an exchange between an education researcher and a four-year-old boy, and Question 2, a transcription of a conversation between a mother and her three-year-old daughter.

In both questions, candidates referred to various theories of language development, particularly Skinner ('behaviourist' ideas of imitation and reinforcement) but also to Piaget and Chomsky. Coupling the wrong name with the right theory, as some candidates inevitably did, is not a problem: the crucial thing is to integrate an understanding of the concept itself (even at a very simple level) into a close analysis of the transcript evidence. Less successful candidates tended to write down everything they knew about a theory but did not apply this knowledge to specific details of language and interaction.

Question 1

Most candidates mentioned 'caretaker' language and accommodation/downward convergence. More able candidates noted the evidence for this: pauses, intonation, re-wording 'pick' to 'get' when Dylan does not appear to understand the question. Candidates were correct if they mentioned that Ros asks Dylan a lot of questions to prompt him to speak – and for once it was no exaggeration to comment that every single one of Ros's utterances/turns included a question. It was not correct, however, to identify all of those questions as *tag* questions.

Many candidates argued that Dylan was still in the telegraphic stage of acquisition because most of his responses were single words, eg *yeah*, *MINE*. Such an interpretation ignores the dynamics of interaction: here, in many cases, a one-word answer was quite sufficient. They also struggled to make useful comment on the phonemic representation of football and basketball – */fʊtbɔ/* and */baskɪbɔ/* – and tended to see these speech sounds as evidence of not-being-able-to-pronounce properly. Stronger responses considered the relative difficulty of the deleted consonants, and noted that the medial */t/* is difficult in a consonant cluster with */b/*.

The mark-scheme indicates other avenues of discussion which proved fruitful.

Question 2

Many answers referred to Halliday's imaginative function to explain what might be going on in terms of language acquisition as three-year-old Lauren puts her bear to bed with her mother's help. Candidates also cited Skinner and Bruner, and noted the use of caretaker language by Lauren's mother in the form of pauses, frequent interrogatives (again often mis-identified as tag questions), intonation, and overlaps for reinforcement.

Stronger answers located specific examples of these features, and analysed in some detail how mother and child negotiated meaning, such as in the exchange which began with the Mother asking *who else carries their baby in one of those*. There was a slight tendency to over-state the extent to which the Mother corrects Lauren's utterances, with candidates suggesting that Lauren had made grammatical mistakes each time her mother repeated or echoed one of her utterances. In fact, *yeah (.) you do have to make up his bed* is more of a confirmation than a correction.

Most candidates argued that Lauren had learned her accent and/or dialect/idiolect from her mother, noticing that both say /jə/ for 'you'. They understood that Lauren's linguistic development was sufficiently advanced for her to appreciate turn-taking and to be able to complete adjacency pairs. For the most part, they avoided the pitfall of over-emphasising gendered elements of speech: it may be that the co-operative nature of interaction between mother and child resembles what candidates have learned of talk between women, but it's much more helpful here to see the dynamics in terms of parent and child.

Again, the mark-scheme contains further indications of relevant material and issues for discussion.

Section B: Speech Varieties and Social Groups

Roughly equal numbers of candidates opted for Question 3 (an exchange about stereotyping, involving three young men who live in a city in the North of England) as for Question 4 (a conversation involving four university students, two female and two male, discussing jobs they have done in their holidays).

The temptation to make prior assumptions about speakers and interactions on the basis of gender theory was too much for some candidates. These assumptions were generally *not* supported by the transcript evidence. Similarly, as in previous sessions, there was a tendency to over-state the significance of power dynamics.

Question 3

Most candidates understood that the overlaps here were co-operative and not competitive, though some were inclined to criticise each speaker on the grounds that he flouted (more often "flaunted") Grice's Maxims of Quantity and Manner. Some detailed attention was given to features of accent and dialect, but often the argument was somewhat circular: the speakers all have a Northern accent, which is their sociolect, and a sign of informality, which is how they communicate with each other because it shows they understand each other.

Better answers avoided speculation about social class or levels of education and concentrated on the dynamics. Many candidates suggested that /dʒə/ *know what* /ə/ *mean* is a tag question, calling for some indication that the listener has understood and agrees. Some identified a lexical field of criminality or deviant behaviour – *doin a bad act criminals ... nutters ...*

The close relationship between the speakers was located by some astute readers in the touches of humour, such as Jamal's description of his friends: *when you look at (.) criminals (.) the people that you'd be scared of would probably be people who are big like (.) dark figures (.) people like you two [laughs] the hoods up and that*. Candidates rightly saw that in another context this might be face-threatening behaviour, whereas here it forms part of quite a complex narrative and rhetorical structure. A few answers moved on to apply Labov's narrative theory to Nathan's as well as to Jamal's stories.

Reference may be made to the mark-scheme for further examples of relevant issues for discussion.

Question 4

Candidates readily engaged with the broader dynamics of the interaction. Generalisations based on notions of gendered speech were mostly supported by the more obvious features of the interaction: the 'boys' do say much more than the 'girls', and Alex and Jason do interrupt/overlap more often than Hannah and Shannon.

Some candidates went on to argue that the 'boys' are busy competing with each other for the girls' attention, and cited Lakoff, Tannen or Cameron as well as referring to Alex's lengthy utterance where he shifts between 'voices'. This was variously seen as sarcastic/ aggressive and friendly/comic – either view was tenable if supported by careful reference to linguistic features.

But the transcript evidence was often not read carefully enough, and some answers referred loosely to features which would have supported their points only had they actually been present in the interaction. So some candidates suggested that *all* of the students discuss the jobs they've *all* done over the summer, or that all of Hannah's and Shannon's utterances are questions.

Some significant details of lexis and register were picked up, for example when the empty adjective *dead* in *dead cute* is used to replace a more common intensifier like 'really'. Some of these features were seen as typically female or part of Hannah's idiolect, or part of the students' sociolect; and some candidates tied themselves in knots over covert/overt prestige, or rather over-stated the significance of a lexical field of employment: *cee vee ... agencies ... quit*.

The mark-scheme offers some further ideas of what might have proved helpful lines of exploration.

F653 Culture, Language and Identity

General Comments

Candidates who applied a consistent range of linguistic terminology to specific passages were able to reach quite competent standards in both AO2 and AO3.

There was evidence of lingering difficulties where candidates did not use the reading time to give selective appraisal to the contents of chosen passages. This was marked by evidence of clear misunderstanding about the actual meaning of the general narrative(s) within the passages. Some candidates still do not appear to allow time to check the actual written coherence of their answers. This is noticeable in spelling and grammatical flaws, which have a clear effect upon the level of performance at AO1. Both of the above issues are recurrent, having been raised in previous reports. Given that this paper will be taken earlier in June than last year, it might be helpful for centres to give careful consideration to the comments on individual questions as detailed below.

Comments on Individual Questions

Section A

Language and Speech

More successful answers recognised that the passages gave adequate opportunities to engage with the never ending debate about differences in pronunciation. Candidates supported their answers by offering further examples from their own studies. They were able also to draw upon a wide range of acknowledged sources to illustrate their ideas. Honey and Crystal were particularly popular. Workman, Trudgill and Giles were cited with slightly less clarity. Stephen Fry appeared, with comments drawn from *Planet Word*. More refined answers were able to use some phonemic symbols and basic vowel quadrilaterals to enhance the academic quality of their thoughts. This was particularly important in terms of AO2, which rewards technical basics in this question. There were several very interesting answers which looked with care at the Black Country speaker. They pointed out that accent can still be a very clear marker of identity - noting that the orthographic representation of the voice did not give the fullest exemplification of its phonic qualities - and of persona pride. Then pointed out that this quality can sometimes be inhibitive in terms of clarity of communication to an outsider. This kind of academic engagement with the topic is a tribute to the preparation given by the teachers/lecturers.

Less secure answers displayed a number of features remarked upon in previous reports. Those which are still outstanding are treating the passages as sociological documents about class/posh people/independent schools/John Reith/ The Queen etc. Whilst often amusing, such work does not address the dominant AO2.

Another difficulty in these answers is misunderstanding what the contents of the passages are conveying. For instance neither Passage (a) nor Passage (c) was about RP. Standard English is a generic term for written, not spoken language. If candidates wish to comment upon Estuarine sounds, which is perfectly acceptable, it is important they can give some basic illustration of such speech sounds. It would help if candidates were given some guidance in being objective in response to questions, rather than adopting a kind of subjective narrative, not related to linguistic basics.

That they can do this was shown by the increase in nearly all answers of candidates making efforts to exemplify the sounds of speech. This was marked by a decrease in candidates treating the passages as a kind of comprehension exercise; or trying to spot grammatical deviations in the actual texts.

Section B

The Language of Popular Written Texts

There were not many responses to this question. Those who answered appeared more interested in the subject's broad terms, rather than its linguistic constituents. One candidate remarked upon the nation's obsession with crime and criminality; especially how it has become a dominant force in much media production. All answers addressed the significant differences between a narrated article in a dramatised documentary format, a fictional work (rather dated being written in 1985) and a dismissive review article. Passage (e) attracted comment on its variation in fonts, the importance of the photograph (multi-modality) and the fact that it was a woman as a 'lead investigator'. What was missed was the construction of dramatised action, akin to scripted language – a feature of much modern journalism dealing with 'real life situations' – juxtaposed with the sentiments of the season in which it took place: 24th December/kids' presents/Father Christmas. The language constructing an interesting 'image' of Vanessa – much of her life reading like a series of dramatised visuals – was countered by the ordinariness of domesticity. Passage (f) was remarked upon for its first person narration, one candidate stating that this was akin to the use of voice-overs. The writing was seen as informal and colloquial. Several answers remarked that the language was mechanical in its simple declaratives and that the narrative 'I' seemed an elusive quality, with few adjectivals picking out personal dimensions of the first person voice. Candidates did not make much of (g), drawing mainly upon the idea that an online review was likely to be 'informal'. In fact the broader cultural references in the material seemed to make this difficult for candidates to comprehend – Whitechapel/Jack the Ripper/The Krays. These are clearly now media-related iconic nouns and certainly gave a kind of, possibly spurious, weight to the lexical range in the passage. It is important that candidates preparing for this Topic are given the chance to consider how generic features do differ in a variety of media, since AO3 is an important objective (mode of production). Centres are on sound grounds if they continue to encourage candidates to include analysis of images and to search out the broader stylistic conventions of each passage and then to apply some micro-analysis to aspects of the text which give adequate evidence of such written conventions. It is not necessary for candidates to undertake a comprehension approach to all passages. Rather more important is to show, by selective reference and analysis, what aspects of the language might signify the various qualities of popularity.

Section C

Language and Cultural Production

This was a popular question, but often seemed to lead candidates into broader speculation about digital technologies, rather than the objective assessment of the varieties of language used to foreground the chosen subject. There were some still perturbing signs that candidates, who read the NP broadsheet, immediately became concerned with issues of social class rather than social contexts and production modes. As noted in Section B, the quality of a good response depends on selecting appropriate linguistic material from the texts and linking this to the overall theme of the power of the internet. Although passage (h) was very rich in word invention, few candidates discussed what these words meant, or how familiar they were with them, or how the morphology was important in constituting their meanings. Given that cultural references ran from the OED via TV and Hollywood to *chav* – each in its own right an interesting noun – the response by candidates was very basic. Passage (i) was interesting in its use of 'scientific mystification' linked with the internet. The time phases and the language in the first four paragraphs constituted an interesting idea about production and the role of the writer faced with this technology.

Candidates made a little more of the blogs, either through personal familiarity or the chance to comment superficially on grammatical blemishes. In fact the chosen linguistic formats of two of the blogs raised a number of questions about online literacy and, indeed, the future form of language. Candidates might well have considered the mode of production and its potential linking to the 'declining standards in English' debate. This material also linked very effectively with the assertive 'scientific' language contained in the final paragraph of passage (i). As with passage (b), candidates need to grasp the overall thematic links in the passages and then select their chosen linguistic constituents in order to outline how the stylistic features of the language used are focused upon aspects of cultural production.

Section D

Language, Power and Identity

This question was equally as popular as question three. It was interesting to note that candidates in general coped rather better with both contexts and language with these passages. One candidate made some very interesting references to how the noun celebrity has changed in meaning from its more august origins to one of mediated publicity – 'famous for being famous' – then citing the neologistic noun 'celeb'. Such an approach indicates really interesting linguistic teaching and a secure grasp of linguistic stylistics. A few candidates misread the passages – especially passage (k) – indicating the vital need for sound use of reading time. Some candidates were sidetracked down the path of general gender commentary/theory, in a pre-packed form and not clearly linked to the writing in the passages; however, Cheryl Cole attracted sound linguistic commentary and some apposite contextual references to the ideologies of style magazines. Most recognised the persistence of the writer in making her a commodity and her personality really of no account, the 'cocktail waitress' NP being equated with artificiality. Candidates also picked up on the collocations of brand names and colloquialisms like 'boobs' and 'mates'. In passage (l) a number of responses picked up the conventions used in some celebrity magazines – diet, weight, smoking, looks and how these were appositional to the selling of music. The conversational style of writing – 'Charlotte put loads of money into this album...' was picked up as a feature of the intimacy that such magazines create, in defining specific images of the celebrity, in an attempt to make her sound just like 'one of us'. As one candidate aptly said: 'The way she is designated by the collocation 'freaking out' and 'the mum of two' are good examples of the way language is used to create the idea that she is real and not just a product of her public relations team...' Most candidates spent less time on James May, which is quite acceptable in terms of the demands of the specification. The basic linguistic comments picked up on the 'nerdy' aspects of the passages, his relatively advanced years and his grey hair. The Lord Byron NP was not understood. Nor was the collective noun blokes given the attention it seemed to merit, particularly in relation to the identity and power generated through this kind of television spin-off article. 'Spitting lead', 'morons', 'sperm donors' and 'laddish culture' also appeared to evade candidates' analytical efforts in locating the stylistic drive of the writing. In fact a few answers tended to revert to the sociological security of reminding readers that a Sunday broadsheet was clearly for the affluent and highly educated, who would not be interested in revelations about a middle-aged celebrity.

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