



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012**

English Language A

ENGA3

(Specification 2700)

Unit 3: Language Explorations

Report on the Examination

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General

This was the third summer series of this unit and examiners reported seeing some impassioned work as students critiqued the pronouncements of the Queen's English Society and the representations of women in the texts about Trophy Wives. There was some genuinely warm and perceptive writing about Ebenezer Le Page and an understanding of the significance of regional dialects. Overall it was a pleasure to see the engagement with language and the critical independence of many students.

This unit is designed to test students' knowledge and understanding of how and why language varies and changes and the social, cultural and personal significance use. In section B the specification encourages students to become aware that just language use itself is not the whole focus of our enquiry. Social representations of, and beliefs about, the language we use are a vital part of our study at advanced level. This emphasis promotes high level critical awareness and reflectiveness about the nature of our subject of study.

The questions this summer provided students of all levels with stretch and challenge as they explored the unseen data illustrating the changing language to refer to women, a regional dialect from the Channel Islands and the prescriptivist discourse about language promulgated by the Queen's English Society. The paper developed a topicality noted by some students with the disbanding of the Queen's English Society seven days before the examination.

All the data used were readily accessible to almost all students and provided plenty of opportunities for discussion at a variety of levels. In Question 1 two texts were provided so students could examine the ways meanings were constructed for a relatively recent term for a woman. In Question 2 students were provided with an extract from a novel containing dialectal variation and a report on the flowering of dialect vocabulary. These source materials in Questions 1 and 2 provided primary data for analysis and discussion. The Section B materials were different: secondary, non-academic (sic) writing about variation and change in English.

The wording of the questions proved largely clear and straightforward. The two bullet points helped students approach and structure their responses to the tasks. The first bullet in each question guided the students to analyse some textual data that was relevant to language change or variation in Section A and came from a discourse about language in Section B. The second bullet then asked students to look at wider issues raised by the data and to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of relevant concepts and issues. The bullets guided students which sources to use and for what purposes. The bullets were designed to help students address the assessment objectives.

There was evidence that some students needed to consider more carefully exactly what the bullet points were asking them to do. In Question 1 some students misjudged the focus of bullet point two or did not address it sufficiently. In Question 2 some students wrote generally about accents and dialects without answering the question. Some students also carried out a textual analysis of Text D which was not required by the tasks.

It was usually more successful when the bullet points were dealt with in order. Some students wrote two clearly separate 'mini-essays' which seemed to help them clarify the different things they were doing in their answer. Some wrote a unified answer that moved from the first bullet to second, sometimes making useful connections. Both methods were acceptable and successful. The key was to make sure that all aspects of the task were covered substantially. Less successful were answers that did not answer the tasks as set, often writing at length and with knowledge, but without answering the question.

Rubric infringements and short or incomplete scripts were rare.

The major issues arising from this year's paper for students looking to ensure good performance in the future are:

- reading questions very carefully to identify exactly what they are being asked to do
- establishing exactly how they are being asked to use the data provided
- selecting relevant knowledge and approaches to answer the questions.

Section A – Language Variation and Change

Question 1

This was the more popular choice in Section A. It provided students with two texts that showed the meanings and usages of a contemporary term for a woman: trophy wife. The first bullet point asked students to explore the ways in which the two texts constructed meanings for the term trophy wife. This was reminiscent of the January 2010 question on the word 'McJob' and was based on the idea that as well as word formation processes we can look at the development of words' meanings through their use in actual stretches of text.

In the second bullet point students were asked to evaluate the significance of the changing terms used to refer to social groups. This gave them the opportunity to look at a variety of groups, eg gender, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, and the ways in which terms for such groups had altered over times. It also gave them the opportunity to look at debates about how important sexist, racist and other forms of prejudiced language might be. As a change question students were able to look at the connections between language change and social values and debates about language reform movements and the agency of change.

Students generally approached the two texts with understanding and enthusiasm, if also horror at their sexism. They understood the ways in which trophy wives were being represented, though some were so outraged at the perceived sexism of the representations that they were unwilling to believe that either passage was intended to be taken seriously. Some did advance a subtle interpretation that Text B had a satirical edge and was mocking the concept of the Trophy Wife. Only a few speculated that the likely American origin of the texts might affect how the reader was intended to respond.

The first bullet point in the question was generally well answered, and students were often fully engaged with the social values suggested by the ways in which trophy wives were represented. Many students managed to conceptualise the representation of the women talked about or addressed in the texts. A minority, however, spent much time writing about the representation of the men, and speculating about the gender of the writers. Another significant minority spent time analysing the texts in terms of mode, in ways reminiscent of ENGA1. These trends demonstrated the importance of doing what the bullet points guide the student towards. The best answers were able to articulate patterns in meaning and the significance to metaphors to explore the objectification of women, the depiction of predatory relationships and the treatment of marriage as a business arrangement.

Students generally used linguistic frameworks successfully in analysing these texts. Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs (and sub-types of these) enabled close analysis of the way the trophy wife was represented. The comments on the use of modal verbs and their effects were often illuminating and were found in answers across the range. Identifying different sentence types, however, was often less successful, with any long sentence, in particular the first sentence in Text A, being wrongly identified as 'complex'. However, some students were able to look closely at the way sentence patterns and aspects of modality orientated a reader's position and their understanding and acceptance of the role of a trophy wife.

Many students misread the demands of the second bullet point. Some, seeing that the texts were about men and women, wrote about the language used *by* each gender, rather than to represent them. Some limited their discussion of ‘representation’ to analysis of the vocabulary in Texts A and B. Some noticed only the word ‘change’ in the wording of the question, and wrote about language change in general, with no focus on the representation of social groups. Some misread ‘social groups’ as ‘social class’ and wrote about RP, accent and dialect.

Students who had carefully established the terms of the task focused on issues concerning how language represented gender, ethnicity, ability and other social groups. Students had already begun this process through their analysis of the phrase trophy wife. Now they needed to consider the importance of the term and others from their own study. The hierarchy of responses began with students able to give examples of words, explore their meanings and representation and use concepts like lexical asymmetry, order of precedence and semantic derogation. Better answers in this vein were able to address the ways terms that refer to people in terms of gender, ethnicity and ability have changed over time and why this might be the case. A few looked at terms currently used to represent groups such as ‘chavs’, ‘emos’ and ‘geeks’, but without any comments on how these have changed, or are changing.

The best responses showed knowledge about PC as a movement for language reform. This often enabled them to address the question word ‘significance’. They looked at theories of linguistic determinism and reflectionism in relation to the significance of changing language. The most successful students argued a case about the relationship between language and thought. Others were able to make the link between the materials and language change, looking at how changing values might change language and how imposed language change might work to promote social change. Many noted that trophy wife was a word being used well after the PC and feminist movements and explored what this might reveal.

More successful students:

- applied linguistic terms and analysis to terms representing trophy wives and their lifestyle as a way of structuring their enquiry
- looked closely at the nouns and adjectives that described a trophy wife interpreting their meanings
- examined and interpreted the verbs and adverbs that described the actions and behaviour that characterised the trophy wife
- used their linguistic analysis to demonstrate the representation of trophy wives as objects, possessions, prey and status symbols
- explored the metaphor ‘on the prowl’
- identified and conceptualized patterns of meaning such as materialism, ownership, social inferiority and dehumanization
- demonstrated how the life of a trophy wife was represented as hard work, slightly seedy and potentially one of appearance over substance
- identified modal verbs and commented purposefully on their effects to position the implied reader and their response to the term
- identified the grammatical functions as well as the person and number of pronouns
- discussed the positioning of the male reader in A and the female reader in B and the different meanings being attached to the term for different readers
- speculated about a satirical purpose for Text B and a challenge to those who valued the role of a trophy wife
- correctly identified the intended focus of the second bullet point
- gave a range of examples of changing terms to represent men and women, ethnic groups, disabled people and sexual orientation

- explored concepts such as lexical asymmetry, suffixation, generic pronouns and default assumptions
- analysed how terms represented social groups as way of addressing the task word 'significance'
- explained a reflectionist view of the connection between language and society and the significance this attached to their examples as a mirror of changing social values
- discussed the relative significance of determinist views in assessing the significance of terms to refer to different social groups
- linked issues to Political Correctness and debates about the agency and effectiveness of language reform.

Less successful students:

- quoted from the texts rarely, if at all
- showed general understanding of the role and status of the trophy wife, but often without accurate linguistic description
- confused interrogative and imperative moods
- confused adverbs and adjectives
- confused first, second and third person pronouns
- wrote mainly about the 'male' author of Text A and the male audience for this text
- agreed with the representations of the life of the trophy wife and thought it was entirely desirable, and that any woman would envy it
- misread the first sentence and others in Text A, believing that the luxuries described were those which the woman who was sought already possessed.
- did not address the second bullet point at all;
- wrote about the language used by men and women in interaction, citing Lakoff, Cameron et al
- wrote about language change in general, usually without any reference to representation, but with emphasis on prescriptivist and descriptivist attitudes to change.
- wrote about language and social class, usually with focus only on the 'classes' they had identified in A and B
- limited their discussion of gender representations to trophy wives and the men represented in A and B.

Question 2

Although this question was a minority choice (about one third of students chose it), it was generally answered well by those who picked it. The question gave students the opportunity to analyse the representation of a regional dialect in a first person narrative from a novel. They also had the opportunity to explore why people might use a regional dialect.

Few students seemed to have any problem with grasping the basic meaning of the text, though one believed that Ebenezer was only in Guernsey on a 'trip', rather than living there. Some were slightly confused about author and narrator but this rarely caused significant problems for answering the question. There was some uncertainty about exactly where Guernsey might be but again this did not cause problems and nor did the dialect vocabulary. There was some uncertainty about exactly what a chancre or ormer might be, but examiners accepted sensible speculation.

The first bullet point asked students to explore the creation of Ebenezer's voice and dialect and to analyse how he conveyed his memories and views. The most successful answers dealt with both parts, though many tended to privilege either the dialectal features or the meanings he conveyed.

Most students treated dialect features as the most significant marker of his voice. Others also looked at the use of discourse markers, syntax and other devices that created a sense of a spoken voice. Some answers focussed at great length on his accent which is not represented in the text, perhaps because of the student's uncertainty about the differences between accent and dialect. Most students were also able to identify some dialect lexis and grammar, though only a minority could describe the variations from Standard English completely accurately.

Students noted the use of concrete nouns from the semantic fields of fish and shellfish: 'long-nose', 'orfi' and 'chancre'. They also noticed period vocabulary in a domestic semantic field: 'copper', 'wash-house'. There was some interesting discussion of how this vocabulary was linked to the island location and the occupations and lifestyle of islanders. Some students were very acute about how this vocabulary was also part of Ebenezer's self-definition in contrast to 'the English'.

Many students noticed the non-standard forms 'they was', 'he have', 'it got', 'broke up' and 'it take'. Students often had difficulty in describing the variations, especially when comparing the forms and functions of features in the regional dialect and standard English. Students needed to clarify that the *form* 'was' functions as and is a plural verb for Ebenezer whereas it functions as and is a singular verb in standard English. Many claimed that 'they was' was using a singular verb, confusing the two grammars. The double negative 'We didn't have no bay leaves' was often identified and labelled. Students often commented on the syntax used for emphasis in 'The crab I like best, me', and 'She was proud, my mother'. A small number of students who knew that Guernsey is located near to France hypothesised about the influence of a French substrate.

There were a significant number of students who adopted a deficit model of dialect variation and repeatedly saw Ebenezer making mistakes and getting things wrong. This was often attributed to his supposed lack of intelligence or his confusion (sometimes attributed to his age). Some students claimed that 'he have holes' *should* have been 'had'. This showed both a misreading of Ebenezer's use of both present and past tenses for different purposes and a deficit model of the relationship between regional and standard varieties (a better modal would have been *would*). The use of 'me' as a French-style disjunctive pronoun for emphasis was sometimes dismissed as 'unnecessary'. It was also claimed that Ebenezer 'misuses' language. When discussing 'it got' this was seen as 'omission' of an auxiliary verb.

The majority of students understood some things about Ebenezer le Page, and some wrote with impressive insight and warmth about his character and how his family and life style were represented. Some answers looked at the fond and detailed evocation of Ebenezer's childhood. Many noted the pride in his background and his sense of not being English. Some responses identified the views and practices of the parents while better responses saw their characters and the nature of their relationship.

The second bullet point asked students to evaluate what factors might affect people's use of dialect. Text D was provided to stimulate students' answers by offering them the view that dialects were not disappearing. Some were uncertain how to use this text and wrote a textual analysis which was not required. Some weaker answers did not focus on what the question specifically asked and wrote rather generally.

The best answers were those that had a very clear focus on a series of reasons why regional variation occurs. Often these very good responses were characterised by paragraphs with a topic sentence that identified a clear factor that influenced language use. Many students showed impressively detailed knowledge of sociolinguistic research findings on the effect of extra-linguistic variables such as class, gender, situation and age. Better answers also looked at later and more recent approaches using concepts like social networks and

communities of practice. These answers also often looked at the dynamics of particular interactions and the way use of dialect might be flexible and variable rather than utterly determined by a fixed identity. The best answers were able to see the changing terrain of non-standard dialects at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st, exploring urban and rural dialects and evaluate the relative importance of different factors.

More successful students:

- understood what is meant by a novel, and realised that Ebenezer is a character, not the author
- correctly identified the probable time period in which Ebenezer's childhood was taking place
- wrote with understanding and sensitivity about the representation of Ebenezer's mother, his feelings about her, and the relationship between his parents
- identified the semantic field of fish and fishing and looked at how Ebenezer conveyed his tastes and views
- showed how the narrator's 'obsession' with the correct cooking of fish is conveyed
- described the way in which social distance is created between Ebenezer and the English, sometimes linking this appropriately to Labov's study in Martha's Vineyard, and the 'dialect island' concept in Liverpool
- conceptualised the representation of Ebenezer and life on Guernsey in the period in which this part of the novel is set
- explored the ways in which the use of short sentences creates Ebenezer's narrative voice
- identified period and dialect lexis accurately, and wrote about how these reflected the narrator's interests and lifestyle
- identified, described and analysed in detail dialect grammar
- identified an appropriate range of theories and research to support ideas about why people might, or might not, use dialects
- considered factors including regional identity, occupation, class, gender, age, social networks and communities of practice
- looked at code switching and convergence/divergence according to situation and audience
- showed understanding of the concept of dialect levelling and its spread or resistance to it
- discussed how social networks might affect the use of dialect
- made clear distinctions between accent and dialect and the causes of their use
- were able to describe with an impressive degree of detail and accuracy, features of specific regional and social dialects to illustrate their answer
- argued a case about the likely continuation or otherwise of regional and social variations.

Less successful students:

- thought the extract was a 'transcript' of a real person speaking to a 'professor'
- confused the author with the narrator
- were uncertain about the text's temporal location and perspective
- described Ebenezer as 'childish' and uneducated
- saw dialect features as wrong and ignorant
- wrote about Ebenezer's 'accent', even though this cannot be determined from the text
- identified mainstream informality features as 'regional dialect'
- identified some dialect features, but could not discuss them linguistically
- did not engage with the meaning of the text
- did not address the second bullet point
- wrote about RP and described it as a dialect
- could not spell Received Pronunciation

- did not distinguish between accent and dialect
- paraphrased the ideas in Text D
- wrote only about the spread of Estuary English
- carried out a textual analysis of Text D
- focussed their answer on the death of dialects and their fall into desuetude.

Section B – Language Discourses

Question 3

The nature of Section B is that it tests students' critical understanding of the way society thinks about language. The texts this year were two extracts from the website of the Queen's English Society. This was a highly prescriptivist organisation that wanted to set up an academy to control language variation and change. The extracts were chosen to enable students to explore and evaluate how the QES viewed language variation and change and its proposals for action.

The majority of students showed some understanding of the ideas in Texts E and F, helped by the fact that Text E opens with a definition of prescriptivism and descriptivism. In spite of this, a few students still managed to confuse the two later in their answer. Some students missed the focus on the QES proposal for an English Academy, which was the most important idea in the texts. The other issue which proved a distraction to students was the QES' own blurring of the distinction between accent and dialect in the discussion of the Queen's English and that of Prince William.

The best answers carefully established what the ideas and views were in the texts. It was not uncommon, however, for students who had gained a very good AO1 mark in section A to do very little linguistic description in section B. Better answers used linguistic analysis to help establish the views and attitudes by close reading of word choices. The best answers also looked at the techniques used in the texts to present their ideas with clarity, authority and in a persuasive way. This fulfilled the aims of this part of the unit to look at how discourses about language disseminate attitudes to and beliefs about language.

There was an interesting range of views expressed about the need to 'impose' Standard English, with the majority agreeing that while it might help in the teaching of foreign learners, they were totally opposed to any attempts to control the evolution of English, even if that were possible, or indeed their own use of language. Few considered how an Academy might be able to enforce their control. It was universally agreed that language change is inevitable.

The majority of students understood that the second bullet point was asking them to evaluate the ideas of the QES about language change and variation. Where students concentrated on the Academy proposals, the answers were better focused. Some less successful responses were characterised by accounts of language variation and change. Slightly better answers used these examples to show how an academy would not be able to control language. Others were able to cite examples of proposals for academies that had not worked.

There were frequent references to the degeneration metaphors of Jean Aitchison, though these were often left unexplained and sometimes loosely understood. Many students still saw Jean Aitchison as a prescriptivist. Better answers, however, explained these different views and showed how the texts' language was part of the discourses characterised by the metaphors. Students were often able to explain alternative views of change, such as functional theory, reflectionism, the influence of other languages, and used these to suggest that controlling English was neither possible nor achievable. The best responses often took specific examples of language use and evaluated whether they were signs of decay or laziness and whether they merited a gatekeeper like the QES. Another high level

characteristic was debating whether prescriptivism was always bad (eg the need for a standard language or radical prescriptivism) and whether a purely descriptivist approach was just too impartial.

More successful students:

- carefully established what the QES's ideas about language actually were
- showed detailed understanding of the prescriptivist views in the texts
- looked closely at the representation of descriptivist views, the representation of people who used English and the state of English
- looked closely at the use of comparative adjectives and adverbs of degree and sentence adverbs to shape the reader's views of prescriptivists and descriptivists
- saw the characterisation of the descriptivist stance as *laissez-faire* and libertarian
- explored the language of control associated with the prescriptivist view
- examined the use of scientific language and metaphor to lend the QES's views authority and credibility
- saw how the QES acknowledged language change while trying to resist and manage it
- considered the modality of the texts in creating authority and certainty, eg the sentence adverb 'fundamentally'
- examined the use of sentence functions to shape and guide the reader's thinking
- considered the significance of the use of third person pronouns to refer the QES
- analysed the elitist attitudes revealed in the presentation of the QES and other language users
- analysed closely the language used to represent the English of 'ordinary' people
- conceptualised the QES's standpoint as elitist, controlling and protective
- looked at the implications of metaphors in verbs like 'defends' to describe the role of the QES
- saw how the texts were part of discourses about language change characterised by Aitchison as the 'crumbling castle' view and the 'damp spoon' syndrome
- took the QES to task over its use of the conjunction and to start a sentence as a sign they could not follow their own rules
- evaluated the use of 'time-proven rules' as ways of prescribing usage
- used the issues of intelligibility and communication to challenge the QES standpoint on accuracy
- argued that the degree of accuracy, planning and proof-reading might vary conventionally from genre to genre
- argued the affordances and constraints of digital communication affected notions of acceptability
- used functional theory to argue the need for change
- examined how variation is tied up with identity
- wrote convincingly about both historical and contemporary proposals for an Academy, evaluating the success of the Academie Francaise
- knew and applied concepts like gate-keeping
- argued a cohesive, well-supported and convincing case usually, but not exclusively, against the idea of an Academy
- evaluated the usefulness and need for standardised language
- placed the debates in the context of world Englishes.

Less successful students:

- did not understand the idea of the English Academy
- misread academy to refer to an academy award or a type of school
- believed that the QES intended to stop people swearing
- believed that the QES did not think that the monarchy would survive
- did not use linguistic frameworks in this answer, even when they had done so impressively in section A
- confused adverbs and adjectives
- had difficulty in controlling punctuation, expression and pronoun use to explain the views in the texts
- confused prescriptivism and descriptivism
- did not explain the Jean Aitchison metaphors clearly, nor correctly identify her own stance
- gave examples of language variation and change without using it to comment on the ideas offered in the texts
- confused the periods of history which they were writing about, and when various events occurred
- wrote only about attitudes to, and the spread of, Estuary English.

Advice to students

Do:

- answer 1 question from Section A and Question 3
- spend 1 ¼ hours on each question
- read the question very carefully
- underline the key words in the question so that you do not mistake its precise focus
- check you understand what language topics and issues your question is asking about
- make sure you adopt the required approach to the textual analysis
- make sure you understand how to use both texts
- ensure you cover what is required by both bullet points
- give roughly equal attention to each bullet point
- read the texts very carefully before beginning to write, to ensure that you have interpreted correctly what is being said
- apply linguistic descriptions when analysing, and make sure they are the appropriate ones for the type of text, eg spoken or written
- make sure that all the theory/research you use is relevant to the specific issues you are being asked to address
- argue your own informed views on language topics, using textual or other evidence
- judge (evaluate) how valid linguistic ideas are and how convincingly they are conveyed
- think about the issues before you come into the exam - if you have clarified your ideas beforehand, you will be able to express them more clearly, which is important.

Don't:

- write answers to both Question 1 and 2 in Section A
- paraphrase the content of texts
- forget to describe important features of language technically
- make sweeping and unsupported assertions
- summarise a range of research superficially with no reference to the question
- offload everything you know about language without checking its relevance to the task you've been set.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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