



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

**English Language A**

**ENGA3**

**(Specification 2700)**

**Unit 3: Language Explorations**

***Report on the Examination***

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## **General**

This was the third January series of this unit and examiners reported seeing a lot of excellent work as students demonstrated familiarity with the paper's demands. The questions provided students of all levels with stretch and challenge as they explored the unseen data illustrating language variation and change and attitudes to them. It was very pleasing to see how the feedback loops created by these reports and Teacher Support meetings were helping teachers and students alike. A substantial number of students were entering the unit for the first time and were impressively prepared for its demands.

All the data used were readily accessible to students and provided plenty of opportunities for discussion at a variety of levels. In Question 1 two texts were provided so students could examine how and why language changes. In Question 2 students were provided with an extract from a novel containing dialectal variation and a dictionary extract. These source materials in Questions 1 and 2 provided primary data for analysis and discussion. The Section B Question 3 materials were different: secondary, popular, non-academic writing about the language topic, language reform.

The wording of the questions proved clear and straightforward. The two bullet points helped students approach and structure their responses to the tasks. The bullets were designed to help students hit the assessment objectives. There was evidence that some students needed to consider more carefully exactly what the bullet points were asking them to do. There was also evidence that most students understood the two focuses that they were being asked to discuss.

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.

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 moved back and forth between the bullets.

Students generally wrote full, substantial answers having carefully processed all the data. There was a better balance this year between the length of Section A and Section B answers. Fewer rubric infringements were seen and short or incomplete scripts were rare.

### **Assessment Objective 1**

The AO1 descriptors are designed to assess how well students can describe aspects of language to communicate ideas as a linguistic specialist. Examiners looked to reward the range and accuracy of linguistic descriptions first and then balanced this out against the quality of expression in terms of precision, organisation and accuracy.

There was evidence of thorough teaching and learning of linguistic frameworks. Students reached the top band for AO1, even when their work in other areas was relatively weak. Some students were obviously operating a checklist of features to spot and ensure high AO1 marks. While this strategy worked well to show their ability to describe language and gained them high marks on AO1, it sometimes hampered them on AO3. A better strategy would be

to start with AO3 and look for key quotations that present texts' main ideas and meanings and then identify the range of salient language features that help create those meanings.

Performance on AO1 was slightly higher on Section A than Section B, with some perhaps forgetting the need to deploy their descriptive skills fully again in answering Question 3.

### **Assessment Objective 3**

This AO is designed to assess students' ability to analyse how texts are affected by aspects of context and the ways in which they create meanings. It is weighted at 15/45 marks and should be seen as linked with AO1 as students need to be able to describe and analyse salient linguistic features and their meanings to answer the first bullet point in the questions.

For many students this was an area which offered room to gain more marks. One tendency was for there to be a lack of an overview of a text's meanings and arguments. Another was to list short paragraphs with disconnected points about decontextualised examples of language. Students sometimes needed to spend more time reading the whole of the texts and establishing tones and meanings before starting to look at language features.

### **Assessment Objective 2**

This AO carries 20/45 marks and requires students to show wider knowledge of the concepts and issues concerning the topic set. It is particularly targeted by the second bullet point.

Students knew most about theories and arguments about political correctness and language and thought for Question 3. There was also evidence of a lot of good knowledge about factors that influence language variation. Many students were well informed about significant events in the history of the language so they could locate the Question 1 texts in time. Almost all could cite a range of views about the causes and nature of language change and the best could use the data to test out their validity.

The big issues for improvement continue to be the ability to select relevant information and to evaluate its significance. Occasionally knowledge about gender and interaction was activated by the presence of women on the texts and this was then offloaded without really illuminating the issues at hand. This is not however to discourage making genuinely productive links between areas of knowledge. Issues about the representation of women in the vocabulary of English afforded some students some very effective routes into comparing the language of Texts A and B. Generally students' responses were much more focussed than in previous series. To gain the highest marks students needed to engage with a range of different perspectives on each of the three topics set and evaluate those different views.

### **Key Messages**

To improve their performance in future examinations students should:

- pay close attention to the wording and requirements of the bullet points and ensure they answer the task precisely
- read for meaning first and generate an *overview of texts' nature and meanings*
- describe and analyse linguistic features *selectively* and *coherently* to illuminate the nature of a text and analyse the meanings that are created
- avoid over-describing language features or describing features which do not help answer the question
- select relevant items from their knowledge about language to answer the specific question
- discuss and evaluate the significance of research findings, rather than just report them
- be willing to argue their own views.

## Section A – Language Variation and Change

### Question 1

This question used the back cover of a book published in 2007 and the frontispiece of a book published in 1753 to test students' knowledge and understanding of how language has changed and the nature of such changes. This question was more frequently answered than Question 2.

Students were asked to analyse the two texts by describing (AO1) and commenting on (AO3) the language used to represent books they referred to. They were then asked to analyse and evaluate how different periods and contexts might have influenced the language of the texts (AO2).

The first bullet point gave students the opportunity to analyse how a text used language to inform the reader of a book's contents and persuade them that it was a worthwhile book to purchase. Text A proved accessible to most students, though the tone and attitudes to women's roles proved to be excellent discriminators in assessing students' analytical skills. Text B allowed almost all students chances to comment on the language of an older text, although some were unfamiliar with the long s used and thought that the copper plates were a gift accompanying the text.

The second bullet point sometimes elicited responses which revealed great knowledge about the history of the English language and theories about, and attitudes to, language change but an inability to apply this knowledge to the texts and use them to explore and make concrete how language has changed. The best responses were those that were able to use the texts to illustrate causes and effects of language change and consider how they might be employed to evidence different views about the process of change.

Unsurprisingly, most students found the first text more 'approachable' than the second. There were some challenges in interpreting the detail of both texts. When students started writing about Text A without reading the whole text first, they often misinterpreted the tone and intention as favouring the 'domestic goddesses' and then had to backtrack wildly. Some never got that far and stuck doggedly to their initial reading, trying to force everything else to fit. There were some excellent analyses of the change in social values in relation to being a 'slob' and 'getting a lifestyle'. Only a small number of students were able to identify the origin of the 'domestic goddess' image.

Text B caused more problems for obvious reasons. All students got the idea of the traditional role of the 18<sup>th</sup> century housewife, and there was some sensible comment about levels of education and female literacy in the period. There were some ingenious ideas about how the text might have been read or received, and by whom. It was disappointing that there was not more comment on the use of 'gentlewoman' other than to point out how the word is formed.

There were sensible comments on the purpose of Text B, including the huge number of recipes, and some comment on, though not much analysis of, the medicines. Few students identified the fact that salt water was actually quite likely to fail as a cure for the bite of a mad dog, even though it was identified as having disinfectant properties. Few understood that engraved copper plates were used to make the illustrations in the book, and many words which are still in common use, such as 'ointment', were regarded as obsolete.

This text provided the ideal opportunity to comment on its historical context. Some students were able to place it very accurately in relation to the process of the standardisation of spelling and grammar. Others were less successful, placing the text just after, or even before, the invention of the printing press. There was a lot of off-loading of knowledge about the history of the English language. In spite of this, the obvious changes in spelling and capitalization gave students things to say which could be credited for AO2. The best responses here either knew about specific changes or worked out patterns in the text and offered a range of supportable hypotheses.

Both texts enabled students to consider how language was affected by changing social values and gender roles. There was a lot of interesting discussion of the terms gentlewoman, housewife, yummy mummy and domestic goddess. Students were able to explore the word formation processes at work and also changing gender roles and ideology.

Another common factor that students explored productively was communications technology. The greater visual variety of Text A was explored and there was some detailed technical knowledge about printing practices.

Some students recognized that even small and apparently trivial details could be quite illuminating. Some noted the changes in currency and how contact addresses had been affected by new technologies.

Many students, though by no means all, attempted to evaluate different attitudes to language change. There was still some confusion between prescriptivism and descriptivism. Students sometimes described the text itself as 'prescriptive' (Text B usually) or 'descriptive' (Text A). Some work on how to express ideas and different views of texts would benefit some students. Many could write about Jean Aitchison's three prescriptivist metaphors, but less frequently give examples from the texts they were analysing. Some students applied the metaphors to the older text, but without recognizing how effectively they could have used it to show that the idea of a 'golden age' of English is a myth. The most successful answers considered how the vogue terms for women in Text A might be seen as unwelcome additions spread like an infectious disease. Others used ideas about functional theories and reflectionism to explore the emergence of words like 'skincare'. A small number considered how the use of the word 'housewife' was in decline and whether this might even be a sign of progress.

Key issues affecting students' performance positively were:

- balancing their answer between the demands of the two bullet points
- using linguistic descriptions consistently across different levels when analysing the language of Text A and B, thus gaining high marks on AO1
- analysing the tone and persuasive messages of the texts
- exploring how communications technology, gender roles and social values influenced the language of the two texts
- evaluating different views of how the changes in the texts could be seen.

More successful students:

- examined the construction of an us vs them address in Text A
- understood the references to 'yummy mummyism' and 'Domestic goddesses'
- analysed the humour and satire in Text A
- explored the imagery and implication of referring to the book as an 'antidote'
- understood the effect of the list of some people's 'ideal' qualities
- explore the direct address and challenge to 'Domestic goddesses'
- examined the humorous and genre implications of describing the book as a 'manifesto'

- understood why 'lifestyle' was in inverted commas
- looked at the persuasive function of adverbs and adjectives such as 'genuinely hilarious'
- looked at the nouns listed in Text B and what they said about the reader's life
- analysed the roles implied by the nouns 'Housewife' and 'Gentlewoman'
- identified the likely social class of the implied reader
- saw the persuasiveness of 'never before made public' and 'excellent'
- considered the values implied by the superlative adjective 'most approved'
- explored the different terms to refer to women and referred them to different gender roles and social values
- compared the focus on skincare, fashion and beauty with health and cookery as signs of different social roles for women
- looked at word formation processes of words in Text A that might have been coined after the production of Text B
- noted how changes in currency and technology affected the prices and the barcode
- compared the nature of the postal or web addresses of the two texts
- understood the nature and purpose of long s and could identify patterns of usage
- analysed when capital letters were used in each text
- noted the variety of graphological devices available in Text A compared to Text B
- explored whether changes could be seen as evidence of language change as decay
- used functional and random fluctuation theories to explain the emergence of language changes.

Less successful answers:

- could make some comment on the interests and lifestyles of likely readers
- could identify different spellings and punctuation but could not comment on these practices
- thought long s letters were the letter f
- thought that standardisation was a one-off event in 1755
- identified 'incorrect' spelling in Text B
- misread companion as the woman being the companion of the man
- thought copper plates were an accompanying free gift in Text B
- offloaded knowledge of the history of English or theories about language change without applying them to the texts
- got side-tracked by ideas about women's interactional styles.

## Question 2

This question was answered by significantly fewer students than Question 1. Students were asked to analyse an extract from a novel by describing (AO1) and commenting on (AO3) the language used to represent the narrator and her family. They were then asked to evaluate the extent to which ethnicity might affect people's use of English (AO2).

Some students relished the opportunity to write about the narrator, her feelings, and her language. There were interesting variations in the way the narrator's views were interpreted. She was variously described as jealous, cynical, childish or exaggerating the family situation. The best responses looked closely at the creation of the narrator's voice and made good inferences from the language used. Some students were confused about who the characters were and their relationship to each other.

The real problem for some students who attempted this question was feeling insufficiently prepared to deal with the second bullet point. Some answered last year's question on the spread of English as a world language. Writing about British Black English was productive and relevant. Some students recognized that the question did not require them to have a

single focus on the effect of ethnicity but gave them an opportunity to explore a range of factors affecting language use.

Successful answers used Labov, Fox, Sebba, and research into social networks. Code switching was an obvious area to discuss, as was the importance of age as a variable, given the age and language of the narrator in Text C. Students wrote effectively about gender, class and situational influences on the use of language. Some wrote about Creoles and their link with ethnicity.

Some students misread the question, and proceeded to analyse the language of Text D; others simply repeated what it said, which was not very illuminating.

Key issues affecting students' performance positively were:

- balancing their answer between the demands of the two bullet points
- using linguistic descriptions consistently across different levels when analysing the language of the extract, thus gaining high marks on AO1
- analysing how Susham revealed her feelings about her family and herself
- having specific knowledge about ethnicity and language use
- being able to argue that ethnicity should not be treated in isolation.

More successful students:

- considered the implications of Kully's gawking
- explored Susham's feelings about Kully's relationships with men
- analysed Susham's disdain for the works of John Gray
- recognized the judgements of Kiz made by the drought metaphor
- showed an impressive knowledge of relevant research
- commented on the grudging tone of 'I suppose'
- detected sarcasm in the depiction of Kiz's perfection and advice
- explored how Susham felt about her own education and prospects
- saw the rebellious and non-conformist nature of Susham
- wondered about how she really felt about her father, despite the rather insouciant style at the end
- looked at varieties of English associated with different ethnic communities
- explored situational factors affecting the use of these varieties
- applied concepts like social networks, code-switching and accommodation
- explored how other variables influenced language choices alongside ethnicity
- showed knowledge of sociolinguistic research on dialects and gender, class and situation
- looked at Multi Ethnic Youth Dialect as an example of how language uses spread across different ethnic groups
- understood the varying attitudes to varieties and usages within specific ethnic communities
- understood negative stereotypes of dialect speakers in terms of class, intelligence and education and saw how these affected patterns of use.

Less successful students:

- went off at a tangent having read the reference to John Gray
- got confused about who characters were
- wrote at great length about 'sis' and 'cos' at the expense of almost anything else
- carried out a textual analysis of the material in Text D.



## Section B – Language Discourses

### Question 3

What differentiates Section B from Section A is that it requires students to analyse non-academic writing about language. It requires students to engage with popular but debatable views about the language topics that they will have studied for Section A. In this examination the question focussed on attitudes to political correctness as a form of language change. Texts E and F were provided to allow students to explore how politically correct language is judged and evaluate the significance of this form of language change.

The first bullet required students to analyse how two texts, both newspaper articles, presented stories about proposals for language reform. The second bullet required students to evaluate the texts' views about these proposals. It enabled them to examine a range of ideas about how important it is to change the words used to represent different social groups. Students were expected to analyse both texts systematically by describing (AO1) and commenting on (AO3) linguistic features to explore the ways the articles and the people they quoted presented their views about language reform. They were then expected evaluate the ideas presented and the arguments given for and against language reform (AO2).

The great majority of students, though not all, recognized that both texts expressed views hostile to language reform. Some thought that Text E was in favour of reform, or at least neutral. These were students who did not pick up the tone created by placing speech marks around key terms which the writer was questioning. A minority of students did not analyse the texts, but spent a lot of time agreeing wholeheartedly with the sentiments they expressed. On the other hand, many students were able to identify the ideology of the texts and dissect the ways in which meaning was constructed and attitudes conveyed.

Better responses were alert to the mixture of quoted views and those expressed by the writer of the article. They looked closely at the nouns and verbs that were used to describe the proposals for change. They also looked closely at strategies for undermining the views. Some responses were able to make good use of their knowledge of modality to look at how verbs, adverbs and inverted commas worked to challenge the truth and value of the proposed changes. Another fruitful approach saw students look at the way different participants in the stories were presented to give their views more or less credibility.

Some responses showed a good overall grasp of discourses about political correctness. Struan Stevenson gave them the opportunity to talk about the widespread preconceptions about PC having gone mad. They were also alert to metaphors of warfare and policing that were used to attack proposals for language reform. Bradbourn's erosion metaphor enabled some to place the anti-PC arguments within a crumbling castle discourse about language change. Many also saw the nationalist, anti-European discourses that were being woven into an attack on particular ideas about language.

Many students had a clear understanding of the history of PC language reforms and the shifting usages of the term politically correct. In spite of occasional confusion, there were answers which showed an impressive grasp of determinism and reflectionism, and which were able to explain how these concepts might affect the importance and effectiveness of language reform. Many linked the reform movement with determinist views about language. Pinker's idea of the 'euphemism treadmill' had considerable influence and engendered pessimism about PC, but there were also students willing to argue the importance of avoiding language which marginalizes or offends. Many considered the agency by which language change occurs and did note that there were now many words that had fallen out of use to be replaced by others with less offensive meanings.

It was pleasing to read many very well informed and densely argued discussion of the value of language reform. Views were varied and the debate was impassioned. What characterised most was a sense that language mattered in some way and they were able to put a case. On the other hand there were some who launched an attack on the whole idea of PC and showed no critical distance or perspective on the materials offered.

Key issues affecting students' performance positively were:

- using linguistic descriptions consistently across different levels when analysing the language of the texts, thus gaining high marks on AO1
- articulating the attitudes and views expressed in the texts
- exploring how these views were developed persuasively
- balancing their answer between the demands of the two bullet points
- evaluating different arguments about how language is connected to thought and behaviour.

More successful students:

- placed Texts E and F in context of anti-PC discourses
- employed a method for analysing how texts represent their subject matter and the ways they construct author and reader positions
- used their ability to describe language to unlock significant representational techniques
- explored the attitude implied by the subordinate clause 'in case they cause offence'
- noted the undermining effect of the relative clause 'almost all of whom were in fact male'
- analysed the hyperbolic and totalitarian implications of 'are outlawing' and the effect of the present progressive tense to make the issue seem live and threatening
- saw how verb 'claimed' reduced the validity of its object
- saw the implications for modality of adverbs of comment like 'allegedly' and adjectives like 'so-called'
- noted the opportunity given to Furedi to give his views unlike the BSA
- examined the implications of the metaphors of policing and warfare as ways of describing language change
- looked at Furedi's language characterizing language reform as coercive and restrictive
- saw how the passive verb 'are not considered' was undermining of the EU's decision
- noted how 'have decided' suggested this was a unilateral and unwarranted decision
- commented on how the modal auxiliaries 'must' and 'should' made the EU seem authoritarian
- analysed the use of the co-ordinate clause as the start of a sentence, 'And the rules have not stopped there,' to emphasise the extent of the EU's attempts to control language
- commented on the crumbling castle imagery used by Philip Bradbourn: 'an erosion of the English language as we know it'
- could contextualise the history of ideas about language reform and its purposes
- used well chosen examples to illustrate the objections raised about sexist or racist language
- evaluated the value of different proposed changes, from simple changes like firefighter to radical proposals for completely new pronoun systems
- noted that language use had changed and this was at least a reflection of changing social values and might have contributed to their transmission
- used the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to examine ideas about linguistic determinism
- criticised ideas that people's language is the limit of their world
- referred to Spender's ideas about language being man-made

- used Pinker’s ideas about a euphemism treadmill to explore whether changing labels changes attitudes
- cited Orwell’s ideas about the relationships between language and thought and explored their viability
- explored the ideas of Newspeak
- discussed issues concerning the imposition of language change: freedom of speech, who should define language, whether top-down change can work
- explored issues about intentionality and irony in the use of non-PC language
- constructed coherent and cohesive arguments
- guided the reader through effective paragraphing and the use of topic sentences
- used precise, accurate, stylish expression.

Less successful students:

- wrote lengthy general introductions discussing the general style and mode of the two texts
- lacked critical perspective and accepted and reproduced the discourse of PC gone mad
- asserted views about the value or otherwise of language reform without linguistic ideas and approaches
- did not express their ideas clearly.

### **Advice to students**

**Do:**

- answer 1 question from Section A and Question 3
- spend 1 ¼ hours on each question
- read the two bullet points very carefully to see how to use the data and what you are expected to do
- give roughly equal attention to each bullet point
- check you understand what language topics and issues your question is asking about
- 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
- be selective about the theory/knowledge you discuss in each answer, so that it illuminates the text you are analysing as well as demonstrating your wider knowledge
- 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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