

Introduction to the Study of Language

You probably remember GCSE English as a relatively cosy subject, focused mainly on what people (including yourself) were writing or saying. On content, to put it another way.

Now, you are being asked to focus on the way in which that content is being expressed: on style, in other words.

Not only is this switch of attention disconcerting in itself, it also brings new problems in its wake. Suddenly, you're being faced with what seems an awful lot of abstruse technical terms you've never met before, whose meaning you certainly don't understand at first sight: *lexis*, for example, meaning vocabulary, or even more simply, words.

'Do I really have to write stuff like this?' you may ask. The answer, I'm afraid, is 'Yes'. For two good reasons.

- 1 Specialist terms may seem a pain at first, but they act as a kind of shorthand and, once you've learned to use them, they save you a lot of effort. Don't use them, and you have to waste time spelling out what they mean.
- 2 Examiners love them. See Assessment Objective 1 of your AS course, which demands that you.

Select and apply a range of linguistic methods, to communicate relevant knowledge using *appropriate terminology* and coherent, accurate written expression.

In other words, it isn't enough to write good sense about a text in ordinary language. If you want to impress your examiners, you *must* use the appropriate specialist terms.

The ingredients of language

The first set of specialist terms you need to know are broad, general ones, used to break language down into its different features.

The specialist term for these features is the *ingredients of language*, and for your convenience they are listed below:

- **lexis:** the words themselves that make up the text or discourse
- **grammar:** the way individual words are structured and arranged together in sentences
- **structure:** the way the content of a text is organized (this is sometimes referred to as discourse structure, *discourse* being simply an earlier term for text)
- **semantics:** the meaning conveyed by the lexis; semantics can be broadened out to include *pragmatics*, the technical term for the unwritten rules that allow us to imply what we mean in social contexts rather than state it directly.

In the case of written texts only, you will also need to discuss:

- **graphology:** the way in which written texts are presented on paper or some other background; their spatial arrangement and layout, the type and size of their lettering, etc.

In the case of spoken texts only, you will also be expected to discuss:

- **phonology:** the use of vocal elements to add extra force to what is being said
- **prosodic features:** the individual parts or ingredients of language that, taken together, make up the texts you will be asked to analyse and comment on.

Note

While each of the above ingredients may be found in a text, each may not always be sufficiently important for you to comment on. Every text is different, and what strikes you in one may not be so interesting in another.

What you *must not* do is simply make a list of the ingredients without saying anything useful about them. The examiners already know what ingredients are in a given text: what they want *you* to do is tell them something useful about them.

Activity

- 1 Which two alternative specialist terms are used to denote a passage of speech or writing?
- 2 What do you understand by the term lexis?

Analysing the ingredients

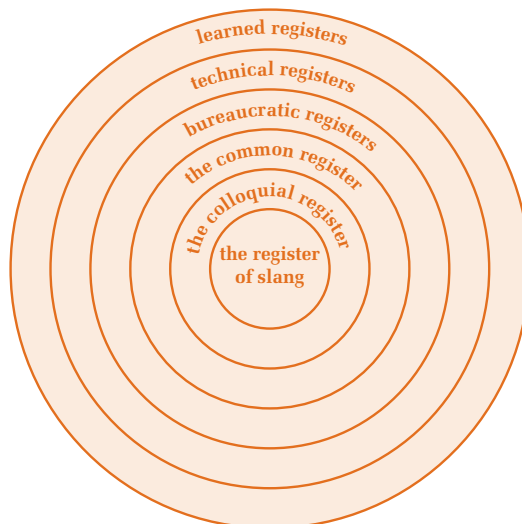
Knowing how to break language down into its different ingredients is fine as far as it goes, but that isn't very far. What we need to do now is break these individual ingredients down in their turn, so that we know how to talk about them in the necessary detail.

Since lexis is the bedrock of every text, it seems logical to start with that. 'What kind of words has the speaker/writer chosen?' should be our first question, and this will introduce us to another important specialist term: **register**.

The concept of register

English has a huge range of vocabulary, basically Anglo-Saxon but with large inputs from French, Latin and Greek, and lesser ones from every country colonized in the days of the British Empire. This richness allows us to create many different varieties of language, or registers, appropriate to many different subjects and kinds of audience.

The diagram below will give you some idea of their range, starting from the most widely used **common register** (the sort of conventional language we use in polite social situations, known as **Standard English**); moving down to the informal spoken registers of **colloquial English** and **slang**; and moving upwards at the other end of the scale to registers that have nothing much in common with any of the first three: the **bureaucratic register** (often known as **officialese**), and the even more remote and impersonal registers of professions such as science, medicine, and the law: the **learned registers**.



Registers and connotations: the right word in the right place

Words are used to **denote** things: *lad*, for instance, as used in the **common register**, simply denotes a male not yet arrived at adulthood – a *boy* or *youth*. But words carry **connotations** also; ideas and emotions that are conjured up in the listener's or reader's mind when a particular word is used. *Lads* used in utterances like *Awa' the lads* or *The lads done good* is quite different in meaning, carrying a heavy overlay of pride and of male bonding – to football supporters, for example.

In the same way, words that start from a similar central idea or meaning, such as *men and women*, can morph into other words with very different connotations in the various registers outlined above.

- Learned registers: *human beings, mankind, humanity, the human genome*
- Technical registers: *companies, managers, personnel, engineers*
- Bureaucratic registers: *the general public, social groups/classes, society*
- Common register: *men and women, ladies and gentlemen, folk(s), people*
- Colloquial register: *lads and lasses, blokes and birds, chavs, geezers, tarts*
- Register of slang: *guys* (fill in others from your own experience).

The progression through the registers from most familiar to most impersonal and remote should be clear to see.

The relationship between register and grammar

Fortunately for A level students, there is nearly always a match between words and grammar within the different registers (a **lexo-grammatical correspondence**, in technical terms).

As a rule of thumb, if the lexis is conventional, the grammar will be conventional also: sentences will be well-formed and grammar conventionally correct. (Don't worry if you don't know much about grammar at this point – you'll catch up with it later.)

If the lexis is the informal one of colloquial English or slang, sentences will often be broken up and fragmentary, and grammar not conventionally correct, e.g. *Well out of order they was, the blighters. That Rooney – he's wicked man, innit*. The colloquial and slang registers are generally spoken rather than written, and so will always be less 'correct' in the textbook sense.

In the learned registers, the sentence structure will be as unfamiliar to the ordinary speaker/writer as the Latinate vocabulary. Speakers and writers will often choose to use the impersonal pronoun *it* for their subject rather than the more personal *you*; they will also often prefer to use the *passive voice* in place of the more usual active one, e.g. *It will be seen/observed that...* rather than *you will see*. This creates a dispassionate tone more appropriate to the rational discussion of intellectual subjects than ordinary language.

To sum up: the more complex the ideas, the more complex the lexis and sentence structure are likely to be.

Critiques of registers in use

A: Degree in café deportment

Peter Mayle examines the behaviour of female university students in the French town of Aix.

Aix is a university town, and there is clearly something in the curriculum that attracts pretty students. The terrace of the Deux Garçons is always full of them, and it is my theory that they are there for education rather than refreshment. They are taking a degree course in café deportment, with a syllabus divided into four parts.

One: the arrival

One must always arrive as conspicuously as possible, preferably on the back of a crimson Kawasaki 750 motor cycle driven by a young man in head-to-toe black leather and three-day stubble. It is not done to stand on the pavement and wave him goodbye as he booms off down the Cours to visit his hairdresser. That is for *gauche* little girls from the Auvergne. The sophisticated student is too busy for sentiment. She is concentrating on the next stage.

Two: the entrance

Sunglasses must be kept on until an acquaintance is identified at one of the tables, but one must not appear to be looking for company. Instead, the impression should be that one is heading into the café to make a 'phone call to one's titled Italian admirer, when – *quelle surprise!* – one sees a friend. The sunglasses can then be removed and the hair tossed while one is persuaded to sit down.

Three: ritual kissing

Everyone at the table must be kissed at least twice, often three times, and in special cases four times. Those being kissed should remain seated, allowing the new arrival to bend and swoop around the table, tossing her hair, getting in the way of the waiters and generally making her presence felt.

Four: table manners

Once seated, sunglasses should be put back on to permit the discreet study of one's own reflection in the café windows... to check important details of technique: the way one lights a cigarette, or sucks the straw in a Perrier *menthe*, or nibbles daintily on a sugar lump. If these are satisfactory, the glasses can be adjusted downwards so that they rest charmingly on the end of the nose, and attention can be given to the other occupants of the table.

Peter Mayle, *A Year in Provence*

Sample critique

The lexis here is drawn largely from the common register: *bend*, *swoop*, *tossing*, for example; familiar words describing familiar actions. The words are simple, clear and so well chosen that the girl's body language comes vividly to life. But Mayle wants to convey more than simple physical behaviour. He wants to show that what is going on here is an elaborate display of artificial manners, contrived movements and gestures designed to make an effect on anyone who might be watching. And thanks to the richness of the English language, he can do this simply by the introduction of words with more mannered and artificial connotations: *deportment*, *conspicuously*, *sophisticated* and *technique* being the most important. Look up the definitions of these words and you will see that each suggests an overlay of the simple and unaffected by something more carefully contrived.

Sentence structure is also fairly simple, most having only one or two clauses. What longer sentences there are tend to consist of a build-up of phrases rather than convoluted dependent clauses (clauses that depend for their meaning on the main clause they are attached to; see page 68), e.g. *Those being kissed should remain seated, allowing the new arrival to bend and swoop around the table, tossing her hair, getting in the way of the waiters...*

Unusually for sentence structure in the common register, however, the writer adopts the use of the impersonal subject, *one*. This is another way in which the writer heightens the sense of social exclusiveness. Compare *I wouldn't like to seem too eager* with *One wouldn't like to seem too eager*.

B: Health scare of the week

The danger posed by sun beds has significantly increased over the last decade, says The Guardian. A survey has shown that, in response to a public demand for a faster tan, an increasing number of salons are using extra-strong lamps that emit between two and three times as much harmful UV light as the equivalent models ten years ago. In Scotland, 83% of the sun beds surveyed had UV outputs that exceeded the limit laid down in the British and European standard. In addition, the introduction of coin-operated machines has increased the likelihood of abuse: it has led to people using them for longer, and less control over the age of users. Previous studies have indicated that people who begin using sun beds in their teens and twenties are 75% more likely to develop malignant melanomas, the deadliest form of skin cancer, than those who begin using them later in life.

The Week, 10 February 2007

Sample critique

The lexis here belongs to the formal end of the common register: words like *posed*, *significantly*, *equivalent* and *exceeded* all have a certain weight and seriousness while being sufficiently part of everyday language to be easily understood by the average reader. *Emit*, rather than the less formal *give off*, trembles on the brink of being technical, and specialist terms like *UV light* and *malignant melanomas* are used to give precision to the piece, but on the whole, the lexis is just what you would expect when averagely educated writers write for averagely educated readers.

Sentence structure matches lexis in this extract, taking the form for the most part of straightforward statements, as in sentences 1, 3 and 4, and when dependent clauses and phrases are used, they follow logically from the main clause without a break, as in sentences 2 and 5.

There are no personal subjects here, as there might be in a more down-market publication than *The Week*. Compare *A survey has shown* with a formulation such as *Investigators from the Sun have discovered that...*

The colloquial register

Formality disappears as we move away from the common register into the informal, colloquial one. Polite modes of address such as *madam* and *sir* give way to more friendly and personal ones such as *mate*; words with a French or Latin flavour are junked in favour of one- or two-syllable English ones; sentences probably become shorter and more brusque. Compare *If I might have your attention, ladies and gentlemen* with *Listen up, you lot*.

Activity

Read the following letter to a newspaper and comment on what you think it reveals about language issues in Britain today:

Failing to find what I wanted in a menswear shop, I looked around for an assistant. A young man approached me. 'Aw wi, mai?' he enquired. Appalled, I made an excuse and left.

The ultra-colloquial register: Slang

The colloquial register slides almost imperceptibly into the register of slang, so that it may seem difficult to arrive at a clear definition of either: *mate* may become *sunshine*, for example, as a term of address; *chap* or *bloke* may morph into *guy* or *man* or *dude* (used to address women as well as men), but where do we put a word like *chav*? Does it belong to the colloquial register, or is it slang? It's a matter of perception to some degree, as with most questions of language use: *bird*, for instance, may be slang to one person, a colloquialism to another. Look more closely, however, and you will see that good slang has something that the 'blokishness' register doesn't have: originality.

Slang is characterized by the use of newly coined words, such as *dumbing down*, *nerd*, *geek*, *yo*; or newly coined meanings for existing words, such as *man*, *my man*, *cool*, *wicked*, *sick* (both these last being 'cool' replacements for boring old *good*), *whatever floats your boat*, etc.

Two of the most important new arrivals on the scene are simply new takes on some of the most basic words in the English language: *Whatever* and *Yeah, right*. These are simple, but devastating when uttered in the bored tone perfected by certain teenagers, and so much better than the old-fashioned *Who do you think you're kidding?*

Jeremy Clarkson (that middle-aged teen) envies his children's access to expressions like these when he at their age had only *groovy*. He thinks that 'the word "whatever" as in "I heard what you just said and I can't be bothered to even think of a response" is one of the greatest additions to the English language.' *Yeah, right* works in much the same way, conveying an enormous degree of cynical disgust and disbelief in two little words. Coinages like these spread like bush fires through the media and turn up all over the world in a matter of days.

Activity

The phrase *I'm like* in place of *I said* is enormously popular at the moment. So is the emphatic use of the little adverb *so*, as in, 'I'm so not looking forward to the party'. What do you think they contribute to the range of English expression?

The ultra-formal registers

As they move upmarket from the common pool of Standard English, registers become more specialized and adopt increasingly large numbers of words drawn from Latin and Greek.

The lexis of the first of these registers, often referred to as *officialese*, or even more pejoratively, *jargon*, is the one that is most disliked and the hardest to justify.

Officialese – the kind of language in which officials of one kind or another talk to us – contains some elements of ordinary vocabulary but is notorious for its use of abstract, impersonal words that are difficult to pin down. When social workers write phrases such as *the structural transformation of multi-agency support systems and services*, for instance, they presumably have some idea of what they mean, but the general public doesn't, and becomes cross. Witness this letter to the *Times*:

Sir,

Which of the two following signs do you think would mean most to the average motorist: 'Bird Flu Control Zone' or 'Avian Influenza Surveillance Zone'? And which do you think the bureaucrats have chosen to erect on the roads of Suffolk? Well done, Sir Humphrey.

The *Times*, 6 February 2007

Activity

- 1 Extract the main points from the pieces of writing below.
- 2 Write a paragraph summarizing the writers' criticisms of this use of language:
 - i in the common register
 - ii using more colloquial language.

Adjust the sentence structure of each paragraph to suit the lexis.

- 3 Comment on the writer's use of the word *fags* in A; the writer's use of *ripped off* in B; the writer's use of *internal lines of communication* in C.

A Of all the things that keep you sleepless in this restive world, good money says that the 'conditionalities' in Iraq are not among them. And yet that is precisely how Des Browne, the Defence Secretary, referred to the problems of the region last week.

Meanwhile, on Sky News, a pundit was speaking in 'generalistic' terms, while back at the BBC a motive had turned into a 'motivation', the tax on a packet of fags became a 'taxation' and a perfectly coherent formula was transformed into a 'formulation'.

Carol Sarler, The *Times*, 15 January 2007

- B** Do you know an A-pillar from an isofix; a hybrid from tiptronic transmission? If not it could prove to be expensive the next time you take your car to the garage for repairs or servicing.

Mechanics are increasingly using arcane terminology that baffles their customers and makes them suspect that they are being ripped off, according to a survey by Direct Line insurance.

Ben Webster, *The Times*, 3 February 2007

- C** In his annual review, the chief economist of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development suggests that if Human Resources departments need to open up internal lines of communication and aim to kill off incomprehensible management-speak so as to get managers and employees talking sensibly together, HR could start by rebranding as 'people managers'.

'People are people. They are not human resources and are not simply personnel. They have skills and capabilities but they also have needs and emotions that need to be looked after,' he said.

Mr Philpott said the spread of jargon was hindering the ability of British managers to communicate initiatives and improve the productivity of their staff. It was also undermining trust. 'If employees don't know what you're saying to them they often interpret it as not in their interests.' He pointed to the widespread use of 'modernization' in the public sector by managers trying to reform working practices. It could convey 'something good', he said. 'But because of the way it is conveyed in terms of management reform-speak, it sounds like a threat.'

- D** Some newer financial advisers pitch their appeal to well-heeled women. Bramdiva, the wealth management company launched by Nicola Horlick, the fund manager, uses its female-friendly approach as its central selling proposition. 'A lot of women are sick of going to people who patronize them or shower them with jargon,' she says.

The technical register

The characteristic lexis of this register also tends to be abstract and personal, but because the words used describe concrete objects and techniques, their meaning can be more easily understood by laymen (people without any expert knowledge of a subject). Consider, for example:

A micro-chip is located in the head of the key which automatically deactivates the immobiliser when the key is inserted in the ignition lock.

When the topic is more complex, however, so of course is the terminology, which then needs in-depth explanation for non-experts to understand. You would need to be very well up in photography, for instance, to cope with statements like this:

The use of extension rings and bellows generally demands extra exposure time, which must be increased according to the inverse square law – for example, a triple extension will need nine times the normal exposure.

Note

The common register often adopts specialist terms from the technical and other registers, while still remaining the common register. A motoring journalist, for example, may use a number of technical terms to demonstrate his or her knowledge while writing predominately in the common register:

This brings big power for sure but not without big problems, too: throttle response becomes slack, engine noise is dulled and steering feel and handling prowess have to be compromised simply to safely direct so much power or, more specifically, torque through the steered wheels.

The learned registers

The varieties of language at the furthest remove from the **common register** – e.g. those of **science** and the **law, philosophy** and **medicine** – are used by people who have had long years of study in their professions. All are full of **specialist terms** derived from Latin and Greek elements, e.g.

- *genotype* – the genetic constitution of an individual (from Greek *genos*)
- *tort* – a breach of duty leading to liability for damages (from Latin *tortum*)
- *hypothesis* – a suggested explanation of a group of facts (from Greek *hypotithenai*)
- *dyspepsia* – *indigestion* (from Greek *dys* = diseased, faulty and *pepsis* = stomach).

You may ask why subjects already as heavy as these should be saddled with the extra difficulty of Latin and Greek terminology. The answer is that it isn't really a matter of choice. The lexis of science and the law must be exact and fixed, so that its users anywhere in the world, at any time, can be sure of what it means. Because Latin and Ancient Greek are 'dead' – i.e. no longer spoken anywhere as living languages – they cannot change their meanings as words in English do, and so are ideal for the purpose.

Choosing the appropriate register

Nobody actually tells us which register to use in which contexts; we pick it up as we go along by listening to other people and noticing their reactions. We learn as children not to use rude words like *poo* in front of adults; as adolescents, not to ask teachers *What's going down, man?*; as adults, not to call employers by their first name without being asked. We learn, in other words, to conform: to adapt the way we speak or write to suit the person we're addressing and the situation we're in.

Activity

- 1 Discuss the use of the following registers, taken from Professor Randolph Quirk's textbook, *The Use of English*.

Bye bye, your Holiness. See you!

Hi, John; I'm just phoning to say your sister has croaked.

Professor Crowell, I think I understand your first two points, but could you explain that last fucker?

(continued)

- 2 You've just broken up with your closest friend/had a terrific argument with someone in your group.
- a Explain what happened to the following people:
- your friends
 - your parents
 - a tutor.
- b Discuss any differences you notice in your use of language in the three accounts.
- 3 Explore the range of the informal register by:
- a listening carefully
- b taking notes of the way you find yourself speaking in the following contexts:
- at home with your family (Do you have any special words that outsiders would not understand? Do you always speak in complete sentences?)
 - attempting to wheedle something out of your reluctant mother or father
 - talking to friends of your own sex
 - talking to friends of the opposite sex
 - taking part in sport or a game of some kind.
- 4 a Now explore the formal register by working with another student or students in the following simulated situations:
- an interview with your head teacher or pastoral tutor
 - a committee meeting
 - an interview with a prospective employer.
- b Discuss any noteworthy differences you have discovered between the formal and informal registers.
- 5 Write a letter of application for a job or a university place.
Discuss the lexis, sentence structure, and grammar used in your letter.

The electronic registers

The new kids on the block – **e-mails** and **text messaging** – belong to the informal range of registers. They have more in common with unstructured spoken English than with the formal written mode, partly because nobody is sure yet what conventions to use in e-mails. The old *Dear Sir*, *Yours faithfully*, etc. of business letters, for instance, looks odd in the electronic setting, but as yet there is no consensus as to what should replace them. Informal e-mails certainly aim at a conversational style, trying to convey an impression of feeling through the use of *emoticons* – groups of characters that are meant to look like a face turned on its side, e.g.:

:-) or :) 'smiley faces', indicating that the writer is amused, or trying to amuse, or being ironical and making fun of what he or she is saying

:(or :('unsmiley faces', indicating regret, disappointment, disapproval, unhappiness

;-) a winking smiley face, indicating 'don't take this seriously'

;-> a mischievous smiley face, indicating that the writer is up to something.

With such appealing little ways of getting close up and personal, no wonder people spend far more time than they should on opening their e-mails, even when they should be at work. E-mails are becoming a serious addiction.

The ways in which electronic methods of communication are changing the language are discussed in Chapter 4, Language and Technology.