



English Language A level

Course plan

This plan shows the structure of the course and gives an outline of the contents. Sections 1–5 cover the requirements of the AS and Part 1 of the A level; Sections 6–10 cover Part 2 of the A level. You need to do Sections 1–10 to prepare for the A level.

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Sample of the A Level English Language Course from Section 1

Topic 4

Meanings and representations

Introduction

In this topic we will be meeting the linguistic methods of lexis, semantics and pragmatics in more detail and considering how they can be used to analyse data in more depth. These methods are to do with the meanings of the individual words. The meaning (or lexical) words are the ones which contribute most towards the ways in which people, places, events, activities and ideas are **represented** or portrayed as real and truthful, both to other people and to ourselves.



You will probably need 3 hours to complete this topic.

Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- explore the reasons for and effects of various lexis whose meanings are straightforward
- discuss different types of pragmatic meaning and what they add to a text
- differentiate between feature spotting and composing a rigorous argument

Lexical choices

The words in the text and their overt meanings are usually the first aspects you'll examine since these are where the speaker or writer has most obviously made language choices. These choices are very revealing, according to some theorists, such as the Austro-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. He claimed that the language which we use, and the frequency with which we select it, not only demonstrates what we are like as people, but actually restricts our thinking since we cannot think about something adequately unless we have the words for it. This theory, which is known as **linguistic determinism**, can be summed up by Wittgenstein's famous 1922 declaration: 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.'

You will be exploring this idea further when you come to consider the work of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, in the section on children's language acquisition. Vygotsky's observations of children prompted him to believe that thinking could not be done without language. Other thinkers have developed the idea that people who speak different languages perceive the world differently, a theory labelled **linguistic relativity**. For instance, the American anthropologist Edward Sapir wrote in 1929: 'We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.'

His work has subsequently been developed by a number of thinkers and what is referred to as **the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** (although not by either Sapir or his pupil, Whorf, themselves) is still very much a live issue among linguistic philosophers. This view argues that individuals experience the world based on the structure of the language they tend to use. For example, many studies have explored the relationship between words for numbers and perception (for instance, John Lucy's 1992 research into the Mayan language, Yucatec).

If the culture and mind-set of a group – and to some extent even a nation – can be said to reflect and to be reflected in their language, it is a short step from this to a prescriptivist approach whereby some countries have kept a careful watch on the ways their languages adapt to changes which are brought about, for example, because the names of new ideas, objects, inventions and practices tend to reflect the nations where they originated. Some languages, such as English, have welcomed new words from overseas. Others have made strenuous efforts to ensure that a prescriptivist attitude is maintained towards language.

Most languages simply stick with the lexis used in a word's country of origin and adopt foreign terms outright. However, in Iceland, there is a movement to create

neologisms (words which are newly **coined** or invented) from existing or even **archaic** (fallen out of use) words in Icelandic. For instance, the Icelandic for *telephone* (which is a similar word in most European languages) is *sími*, an Old Icelandic word for long thread.

Icelandic scholars have also been keen to make new compound words to replace foreign intrusions. **Compounding**, or making words out of two or more existing words, has always been common in Old Norse and Germanic languages. One example is *veðurfræði* (meaning meteorology) which has been formed from *veður* (weather) and *fræði* (science).

In English-speaking countries, many words which more obviously derive from overseas tend to carry a certain amount of overt prestige, perhaps because they portray their users as sophisticated and educated. Moreover, English speakers tend to go to the specific languages of groups where people are assumed to be particularly expert in a field, when they want to label objects or ideas from these fields. For instance, we often use words from Italian when we are looking for specialist words to do with music (such as *adagio*, *staccato*, *cantata*) or French when we are naming fine food or the places where it is served (for example, *bœuf bourguignon*, *restaurant*).

Similarly we tend to aim for overt prestige when we create – and then use – words for new ideas or inventions. Typically such words will be made of elements from the ancient languages of Latin and Greek since these two civilisations have been revered in Britain since before mediaeval times. So John Logie Baird, the inventor of the television, plundered these languages (using *tele*, the Greek word for far and *visio*, the Latin word for sight) to label his new creation, though Christopher Cockerell, the inventor of the hovercraft was happier with a compound word drawn from more down to earth words.

Sophisticated (or **elevated**) lexis which appear less commonly than ordinary words (and hence are termed **low frequency lexis**) also tend to confer overt prestige on the user. **High frequency lexis** are more often used in informal conversations or written material aimed at a less educated audience. You will be exploring the relationship between language and social status more in a later section.

Other sorts of lexis which have implications for the formality of a text include:

- **dialect expressions** or expressions particular to one region
- **technical lexis** or any words which come from a specialist area – either words which belong only in that area (such as microorganism in the field of science or haute couture in the field of fashion) or words which have both a general meaning and a **dedicated** (subject-specific) meaning in a particular field (such as the box in football or web in computing)
- slang
- **demotic lexis** or swear words

Activity 1

(Allow 40 minutes)

Read the following texts and try to identify one example of each of the following types of lexis.

- archaic lexis
- a compound word
- high frequency lexis
- low frequency lexis
- technical lexis
- dedicated lexis
- a dialect expression
- demotic lexis

Text D: A poem by Christina Rossetti (1830-94) written in 1862.

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

Text E: An extract from Nelson Mandela's speech at his trial in Pretoria, 20 April 1964.

I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live

for and to see realised. But, my lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

Text F: A transcript of the opening sequence of a job interview at a gift shop. Bonnie, 51, is the owner of the shop, Maria, 16, is at school and looking for weekend work.

Maria [on mobile outside]: gotta go (.) Em (.) just piss off (.) will you (.) can't tell you owt till later [walks into office]

Bonnie: Maria (.) /is it

Maria: /yes (.) sorry (.) I'm really late (.) bus

Bonnie: no problem (1) how do you do

Maria: er (.) alright (.) er (.) how do you do

Bonnie: did you find your way alright

Maria: yes (1) I only live off of the Ring Road but the bus (.) er

Bonnie: well (.) um (.) let's get down to it (1) have you had any experience of retail before

Maria: er (.) not really (.) I never done owt (1) not working I mean (1) I mean I do (.) like shopping (.) obviously.

Here are some suggestions.

Type of lexis	Example in one of the texts
Archaic lexis	thou wilt
A compound word	dewdrops
High frequency lexis	did
low frequency lexis	domination
Technical lexis	retail
Dedicated lexis	ring
Demotic lexis	piss
A dialect expression	owt

Literal v figurative language

So far we have mainly discussed the overt meanings of words. However, much of the language we use, even in everyday conversations which are not consciously crafted or formal, is

figurative and does not mean what it says **literally** (exactly, without exaggeration, not metaphorical). Literal language has no connotations or underlying meanings. Figurative language is metaphorical (where a person, object or idea is described as if it were another person object or idea). Some examples are:

- Jason is wearing a green jumper. Green here is the literal (actual) colour of the clothing.
- When he saw the car his brother bought, Jason was green with envy. It is unlikely that Jason has actually turned green here; however, in our culture, green is a colour associated with envy so green is a metaphor here.
- Jason decided to join the Green party. This is another metaphorical use of the word. Green here stands for ecologically aware and has become a proper noun (name of a specific person, place or thing) to denote the political party whose aims are ecologically based.
- Jason's eyes were as green as emeralds. This is a simile, another sort of figurative language. Here, unlike in the two examples above, the comparison between one idea and another is made explicit.

Sometimes we are aware that the choices we are making are figurative; sometimes the metaphor is so well used that we do not realise. Metaphors of this sort (for instance, the expressions *bitch* for an unpleasant female or *over the moon* for delighted) are called **dead metaphors**.

Some expressions have both a literal and a figurative meaning. For example, if a doctor asks, '*Are you alright?*' the likelihood is that she will actually be wanting to know what you are feeling, physically or emotionally. However, we very frequently greet our friends with a brief '*Alright?*' even when we have no intention of hanging around to hear any details. This is known as pragmatic language usage – where there is an underlying or implied meaning which is different from the literal meaning but which all parties understand.

When writers or speakers are using language pragmatically they often play on the ways the underlying meanings or **connotations** of words work with the literal meanings to achieve their purposes. For example, occasionally a writer/speaker uses **intertextuality** as a technique. Intertextuality occurs when one text reminds a reader/listener of another text. For instance a television advertisement could be purposely designed to remind its audience of a sitcom (for example, by including the same characters) so that the audience will respond to it appreciatively.

Writers and speakers can achieve particular effects if they select words which come from the same area, either literally or figuratively. For example, metaphors in sport often come from words used in warfare (for instance, *attack*, *defender*, *captain*, *campaign*). Lexis used when describing emotions often refer to parts of the body, such as the heart or the guts (even though we no longer believe that these parts of the body are responsible for these emotions). A meaning category is referred to as a **semantic field**.

Activity 2

(Allow 30 minutes)

Remember the language you have encountered in the past two or three days and try to identify each of the following types of lexis:

- literal lexis
- a dead metaphor
- a simile
- a semantic field
- an example of intertextuality
- a connotation.

Here are some examples from the language usage and experience of Hugh, the chair of a local walking group.

Type of lexis	Example you have used
Literal lexis	<i>It's raining again.</i>
A dead metaphor	<i>I'm starving!</i>
A simile	<i>The mist is coming down as thick as soup.</i>
A semantic field	<i>It's only a smallholding – a few ducks, geese, some chickens and three or four pigs.</i>
An example of intertextuality	<i>For this relief, much thanks</i> [deliberately misinterpreted quotation from <i>Hamlet</i>

on sitting down for a while after a morning walking the fells]

A connotation *It's very homey in here, isn't it?* [of the pub where the walkers have lunch]

Feature spotting

To review what you have learnt about language analysis so far: to identify features of texts is to make a good start to stylistic analysis. However, you'll have to do more than this to gain the highest marks in exams. Simply noting or describing an aspect of language – or even attaching the right piece of academic terminology to it – is known as **feature spotting** and it will gain you little credit. Remember to discuss the reasons why language is used and assess its impact, reminding yourself of Topics 1 and 2 when you began to consider the roles of purpose, audience and context in the language choices people make and how they respond to the language choices of others.

We have already discussed the importance of backing up everything you say with supporting evidence from the text. However, make sure that you really explore this evidence, rather than simply dump it into your answer – the quotation will not do the work for you. Many very promising answers fail to convince because they are not specific enough.

Look at the difference between these two points, made about the representation of actor Amanda Seyfried in a headline in the *Mail Online* of 8 June 2015. Both of them are attempting to be analytical as they claim that the paper is **objectifying** Seyfried (treating her as though she were an object rather than a person).

Golden girl! Amanda Seyfried displays her svelte shape in stunning off-the-shoulder dress at the Tony Awards

The paper objectifies Seyfried by calling her a *girl* and focusing on her clothes and looks.

The paper appears to objectify Seyfried by concentrating on the way she looks rather than her talent or accomplishments – the term *Golden girl*, which is patronising in itself (the star is 29, a long way from being a child), seems to refer to her dress rather than any award she has won. Though the evening has been held to reward achievement in the theatre, the headline suggests that Seyfried's chief worth resides in her sexual attractiveness as connoted by the implication that the dress is *stunning* partly because it is *off-the-*

shoulder and thus reveals more of her body. Interestingly the writers use the word *svelte* rather than *thin*. The former word is taken from the French, a language which has long been associated with high fashion and chic, and so it enhances the view that Seyfried is stylish rather than underweight.

The second piece of analysis is both detailed and tentative (note the usage of carefully qualified expressions such as *appears to*, *seems to*, *suggests*, *connoted*, *implication*, *partly*, *associated*, *interestingly*, *enhances*). Tentativeness is crucial since you can rarely be certain exactly why a text is produced and what its effect will be on its recipient(s). You will not get any fewer marks because you sound uncertain! Rather, your attitude will show the examiners that you understand that language is complex and shifting.

In the same way, if you are conducting a study, you will not be rewarded simply because your hypothesis seems to be 'correct'. For a linguistic hypothesis to be correct, it needs to be very basic indeed. Sometimes very straightforward exercises are useful starting points. For example, counting the number of positive adjectives in a text should lead to working out what difference these adjectives are making to the text. But such **tallies**, as they are known, should not be ends in themselves.

You will gain the most marks for:

- the thorough and cautious way in which you approach the data
- exploring and assessing what is there rather than what you expect to be there
- coming to conclusions which are valid even though they may not seem to add much to the sum of human knowledge or even to have been anticipated at the start of your investigation.

Activity 2

(Allow 20 minutes)

Look at the discussion of an item of elevated lexis – the word *domination* – in Text E, the speech by Nelson Mandela, which is reprinted here.

I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to see realised. But, my lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

You will notice that the following paragraph is rather superficial and fails to probe the text in any depth. Its conclusions are rather vague. Extend it to make it more analytically effective.

The word *domination* appears twice in the same sentence in this speech. It is a strong word since it means having power over so it makes Mandela look powerful for using it. Strangely, Mandela talks about both white and about black domination as if the two were the same because he hates all form of domination. There are other important words beginning with *d* so that emphasises it.

Mandela's choice of this word is effective firstly in that it crystallises the cause for which he has been fighting and for which he is prepared to sacrifice his life. The length and repetition of its four syllables convey a sense of the total pitilessness he is battling. *Domination* is a word which has clear roots in Latin and this gives it a lot of seriousness which is appropriate for the context – of a courtroom – where dignity and solemnity are expected. Moreover Mandela consciously insists on his status as a free and an educated man (important because he is a black African in a then white-led government) by using this sort of lexis confidently and stylishly.

The word **alliterates** with [begins with the same consonant as] other significant words such as *dedicated*, *democratic*, *die*, making them memorable and quotable (since this case would be reported around the world). These words need to be emphasised: *dedicated* stresses how totally he is committed to his cause, *democratic* is a term which, like *freedom*, is invariably positive and establishes his moral high ground while the whole extract is geared to move towards the final *am prepared to die*, whose uncompromising impact is highlighted by the direct address (and possibly the

paralinguistics of looking straight at the judge) of *my lord*. Lastly, because this word stands out, Mandela can use it in a paralleling technique (*I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination*) to make one of his key points; that he is not simply interested in freedom for black people but for whites too and feels that even his own people are not simply innocent victims.

Self check

(Allow 20 minutes)

- 1 Give one example of a concept which has no word in English and for which we have had to borrow a word from overseas.
- 2 Write one sentence which characterises the difference between a typically English approach to the integration of foreign words into the language and the attitude of Icelandic scholars who try to restrict the influx of foreign words.

You will find the feedback to self checks at the end of this section.

Summary

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- distinguish between different types of lexis, including both those with literal and those with figurative meanings
- identify your own use of pragmatic language
- develop your arguments more explicitly and analytically.

Key terms

Represented: portrayed, presented as real and truthful

Linguistic determinism: theory which suggests that we cannot know or think about something adequately unless we have the words and linguistic structures for it

Linguistic relativity: theory which suggests that people who speak different languages perceive the world differently

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: theory which argues that individuals experience the world based on the structure of the language they tend to use

Neologism: word which is newly coined [see below]

Coin: (of language) invent

Archaic: fallen out of use

Compound word: word made of two or more existing words

Low frequency lexis: lexis which appear less often than ordinary words

Elevated: sophisticated

High frequency lexis: lexis used often, usually unsophisticated, sometimes informal

Dialect expressions: expressions particular to one region

Technical lexis: words which come from a specialist area

Dedicated lexis: words which have a general meaning but also a subject-specific meaning in a particular field

Demotic lexis: swear words

Figurative: metaphorical

Literally: exactly, without exaggeration, not metaphorical

Proper noun: name of a specific person, place or thing

Simile: type of figurative language where the comparison is made explicit

Dead metaphor: metaphor which is so well used that the speaker/writer is not aware of using figurative language

Connotations: underlying meanings

Intertextuality: technique whereby one text reminds a reader/listener of another text

Semantic field: meaning category

Feature spotting: simply noting or describing an aspect of a text rather than analysing it

Tally: reckoning of the number of times a language feature occurs in a text

Objectify: treating a person as though s/he were an object

Alliterates: begins with the same consonant as

References

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What next?

We hope this sample has helped you to decide whether this course is right for you.

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