

LINGUISTICS TO THE 'O' LEVEL EXAMINATION

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"We should also like to see the foundations laid of a study of some of the basic principles of Linguistics, with English as the language of exemplification".

(120, The Examining of the English Language, SSEC, 1964)

1. We would like first to state categorically, in view of certain misconceptions which are current, exactly what kind of linguistics we see as being relevant for the 'O' level examination; therefore we will briefly consider what we mean by the term "linguistics", and indicate its immediate relevance in this particular context.
2. (i) Linguistics is not to be taken, from the present point of view, as a historical survey of the development of language - what is normally called "comparative philology". This is only a sub-section of the discipline as a whole, which has been isolated and unjustifiably identified with the whole. And while this kind of study may be of some value in providing children with a background to the present state of the language, it should not be taken as the main focus of attention. The central function of linguistics is to study living languages, not dead ones.

(ii) Linguistics is not "traditional grammar", i.e. is not primarily concerned with clause analysis and parsing as ends in themselves. This provides an unrealistic picture of living language, and does not help to relate the child's intuitive and empirical experience of his language to his study of language in a more rational way in school, which, if presented in another way from that which is carried on at present, can improve his understanding and manipulation of the forces within his language. (Cf. below, for some practical suggestions in this respect.)

(iii) Linguistics must not be too facilely identified with such fairly popular labels as "structuralism" or "structural linguistics" (e.g. associated with the name of C. C. Fries); nor must it be too narrowly defined as dealing with certain fragments of language, e.g. dealing only with the study of strange sounds isolated from reality. While some linguists find this important, we consider that linguistics has more important and fundamental assistance to offer, which would be of particular relevance to an 'O' level examination.
3. Therefore, to consider what linguistics is, at this level:
 - (i) Linguistics is simply concerned, fundamentally, with the broad, general study of LANGUAGE in the mass, and with more particular study of the child's own language - in our case, English. We want him to be able to talk about the English language as language. Language is seen as the chief means of communication, with four basic forms: Listening, speaking, reading and writing. The amount of detail which one would include in an 'O' level course need be no more than that normally given in other subjects, such as Physics or Chemistry. Clearly, in our case, we need not go much further than providing a more systematic and realistic explanation of the systems and skills which the user already operates than we consider has hitherto been available.

(ii) Within this general framework, two points need to be emphasised:

(a) Language is primarily spoken, and secondarily written, and within the two media there are many definably distinct styles, each appropriate to its own situation, e.g., the clear differences between colloquial speech, formal kinds of speech and writing, specialised languages for different forms of activity, styles of letter-writing and so on. At all times, we are emphasising that language is a skill which is flexible, and we are

trying to foster an understanding of its flexibility - a child should know what kinds of language there are available for use (his "natural resources"), how he can talk about the differences between them, and when he is expected to use them.

(b) Arising from this, as in any kind of explanation of every other skill and science, there needs to be a small body of carefully-defined terms - tools of description. It is important to note that this does not need to be a technical jargon, as was often the case in older textbooks, but simply terms which clearly refer to certain patterns in language, which would be given a more realistic definition, and which would be more attuned to the expectations of common sense. It is extremely difficult to completely get rid of such words as "noun", "relative clause" and "sentence", because one needs labels in even very simple stylistic discussion, description of certain kinds of effectiveness, and so on. Rather, these terms can be cut down to a minimum and better defined. How many one will need will depend on how many terms can account satisfactorily for all the main contrasts that exist in English; it will not be a case of, for example, subdividing adverbial clauses into many types, which is not at all of primary importance in English usage. Secondly, definition of such terms will be more clearly related to perceivable patterns of language, and not, for example, on vague notions of the "meaning" of things: sentences can be defined more usefully and clearly in terms of a group of words which are not grammatically dependent on any other piece of language than in terms of "complete thoughts" or something which begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop; nouns have much more to them than merely naming "persons, places and things"; and so on. We can go into this more fully if this should be necessary.

4. The following are just a few examples of the kind of question that we think could profitably be answered. This is a selection only, and should not be taken as exemplifying to the full the kind of information which linguistics could provide.

- (1) What resources has the English language for talking about (e.g. future time, emotional attitude, number)?
 - (2) In English there are (e.g. tenses, patterns of intonation). What use is made of these?
 - (3) Find colloquial features in Passage A that you would not expect to use in a formal situation.
- or Rewrite this colloquial passage in a way you feel to be more suitable for use in a formal situation.
- or What kinds of language would you not be expected to use in having a conversation with your headmaster?
- or What do you think are the main differences between language exemplified in the following passages (e.g. poetry/prose)?

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(4) People have objected to the following sentences, calling them "correct" or "incorrect". Explain why they might be criticised.

or These days one may hear (e.g. "She is taller than me" as well as "She is taller than I"). Do you think there is any justification for using either or both of these?

(5) Some words have different meanings in different situations (e.g. report, case). Discuss.

(6) Questions on ambiguity in language, synonymity, etc.

(7) In the following example, a (word, phrase, etc.) has been used in an unexpected position. Comment on this from the point of view of stylistic effect. (e.g. The house, old and ruined, stood in the corner).

(8) What are the differences between metaphor and cliché?

(It would, of course, be possible for some of these questions, e.g. (4), (5), (7) to be organised for battery testing).

5. What is obviously required at this level is the initial stages of a full description of the English language. The above is a practical attempt to anticipate such a study.