



Pearson  
Edexcel

# A Level English Language

Guide to Issues,  
Concepts and Theories





## Content page

	<b>Page</b>
Introduction	3
Why should students use theory?	3
How do students use theory?	4
Exam tips	6
What theory?	6



## Note from the Pearson English Team

We hope that you find this guide helpful when delivering our A level English language qualification. We are intending to add exemplar work to this guide after the Summer 2019 exam series to exemplify good practice in relation to issues, concepts and theories.

### Introduction

This guide has been produced to help teachers of A Level English Language show their students how best to handle ‘theories’ of language study, and the ‘theorists’ associated with them. The inverted commas in the previous sentence reflect the fact that the term *theory* is not straightforward in its application.

The first part of this guide outlines the role of *theory* in the study of A Level English Language – *why* students need to know about it.

The second part discuss the kinds of reference to theory that examiners are able to reward highly, and approaches that are less successful – *how* students should apply it.

The third part briefly outlines a few examples of particular theorists and theory areas – *what* students might refer to.

Teachers have asked if Pearson Edexcel can produce a comprehensive list of language theories and theorists that students should know. This guide is in part a response to such requests, but it is crucial to recognise that (for reasons that should become clear in the next section) it would be counter-productive to attempt to produce a definitive list of theories or theorists, and the linguistic concepts and academics associated with them named in this document should certainly not be treated as providing a ‘theory list’ that is either necessary on the one hand, nor sufficient on the other.

### Why should students use theory?

It may come as a surprise that little direct mention is made of theory in the official documents that underpin this qualification. The prescribed subject content published by the Department for Education on which all current A Level qualifications are based makes no specific mention of the need to learn language theories as specific subject knowledge. Instead, it focuses on the need to *‘introduce students to the concepts and methods of the disciplines of English language/linguistics in relation to a wide range of spoken and written forms of English’* and to ensure that *‘students’ contextual study of language must be based on sound theoretical knowledge developed through a coherent course of study.’*<sup>1</sup> So ‘theory’ should be seen not as a set of subject content for students to learn and repeat, but as the academic underpinning of the approach they take to the study and analysis of English Language.

Similarly, the Assessment Objectives that apply to all A Level English Language qualifications make no explicit reference to theory at all. AO2, which is often thought of as

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<sup>1</sup> GCE subject-level conditions and requirements for English language. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gce-subject-level-conditions-and-requirements-for-english-language>



the 'theory' AO requires students to '*Demonstrate critical understanding of concepts and issues relevant to language use.*' These 'concepts and issues' can include 'language theories' in the commonly understood sense of referring to the particular insights and approaches of named academics, but they are far broader than this, and the phrase 'relevant to language use' is particularly crucial here. Students will get little credit for knowing about a given language theory, concept or issue, unless they can use it to illuminate their understanding of language in use.

The approach taken by Edexcel in our specification and scheme of assessment is to encourage students to approach language concepts and issues not as a body of knowledge to be learned and regurgitated, but as a set of tools to be used for critical analysis of language data by using holistic mark-schemes that do not separate out marks for AO2, but instead place the AOs as linked 'strands' that are interdependent. So, for students to 'apply appropriate methods of language analysis' required by AO1, they will have to identify relevant concepts and salient issues in the language data under discussion, and use them to explore the meanings that are 'constructed' by the language in the light of 'contextual factors' and the choices of 'language features' that are required by AO3.

Ensuring that students have a diverse 'toolkit' of concepts and theories relevant to all aspects of the course will help them to select those appropriate to the given data under discussion, and that *selection* of the most useful analytical tools is one of the key indicators of a 'discriminating approach' that is characteristic of Level 4 responses. If, in addition, students are able to demonstrate understanding of the strengths and limitations of the concepts and theories used, and are able not merely to select and apply them, but, where appropriate, to compare and contrast the effectiveness of different approaches to the language data, and to apply them to analysis that is thorough, but nuanced, then they are likely to demonstrate a 'critical evaluative approach' that is characteristic of the top of Level 5 in the mark schemes.

## How do students use theory?

Students are, of course, not expected to have the level of understanding required for degree level and they do not necessarily need to be introduced directly to high-level academic primary sources. But equally, students should be encouraged to avoid simplistic, or even erroneous, presentations of linguistic theories and concepts. For example, students should:

- develop a sense of concepts and theories that are broadly accepted by academic linguistics
- understand that some concepts and theories are more contentious or polarising
- appreciate the way in which linguists develop, challenge and modify the ideas of predecessors
- appreciate theorists do not come up with ideas in isolation.

Such deeper and more nuanced understanding will help students to apply theory with the kind of critical and evaluative approach required at the high levels of the mark schemes.

The main weaknesses that examiners see in students' approaches to theory can be summed up as flaws in understanding theory, and weaknesses in applying it. Basic flaws in understanding can often come from students who are otherwise clearly very able, but



clearly have not grasped some of the key linguistic concepts and approaches they have encountered.

*'Lower performing students chose superficial elements of the frameworks to comment on and did so with little development or depth, often with no theoretical discussion or overly explained theory that actually showed misunderstandings of core ideas or were irrelevant to the data. Application of gender theory was often very descriptive and didn't enhance their analysis.'* (Examiner Report – Paper 1, 2018)

Another characteristic of lower performing students was a lack of clarity about the nature of the work of key researchers, or the source of the theory i.e. the theorist themselves as opposed to the writers of A level text books or blogs summarising linguistic concepts

The above issues are best illustrated by example. With regard to children's literacy development, the first Examiners' Report on the child language acquisition paper for the new qualification stated: *'Students are encouraged to explore theorists other than Kroll and Barclay when analysing written language'*, while the 2018 report warns that Kroll is *'a very popular theorist among A level students but not always the most useful for explaining why and how children develop literacy.'*

It is no surprise that these theorists have become popular at A level. They provide an easily learned set of terms as an entry point for labelling features of children's writing, and as such were also mentioned in one of the exemplar schemes of work produced for this qualification.

Although these models are useful for classification (description) they are rarely used by students as explanatory or analytical tools. For example, Kroll writes in the essay that appears to be the origin of this particular version of the model: *'However, this kind of model oversimplifies development by making it appear to be unidimensional and strictly linear. On closer examination, the development of speaking and writing would undoubtedly appear to be cyclical and multidimensional'*<sup>2</sup>. This is an insight that could usefully be employed in student responses.

The highest performing responses, for example:

- recognise that concepts and theories have to generalise from a complex reality
- understand that concepts and theories cannot simply be 'mapped onto' language data in a one-dimensional way
- appreciate the need to take account of context at all times
- recognise that the actual language used will be driven by a range of factors not just the theory
- appreciate grey areas where a number of theories could be applied or where whole or aspects of a theory could be dismissed based on evidence from the given data.

A further very common example of this phenomenon comes in students' treatment of gender theory, where the classification of theories into the 'deficit, dominance, difference and discursive' models can either provide a very useful point of entry for further discussion, or unhelpfully 'close-down' understanding, and result in implausible generalisations '

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<sup>2</sup> Kroll, B. M., & Vann, R. J. (1981). Developmental relationships between speaking and writing. *Exploring speaking-writing relationships: Connections and contrasts*, 32-54.



In particular there is a tendency to link Robin Lakoff simplistically with a ‘deficit’ model, erroneously understood as suggesting that women are incapable of using language as well as men; the main thrust of Lakoff’s argument is not that the women’s language is intrinsically ‘deficient’ but that it encodes female’s subservient social roles relative to the dominant male discourse. Lakoff’s seminal study *Language and Woman’s Place*, first published in 1975<sup>3</sup>, is understandably frequently mentioned, but often misunderstood. Some students seem to believe that Lakoff is a misogynistic male rather than a pioneer of feminist linguistics.

## Exam Tips

*‘It can often be useful and help illustrate understanding if you briefly define or explain any theory that you are applying’ (Examiner Report – Paper 3, 2018)*

*‘Embed theories within your response, where relevant, and link features you discuss to the development of identity or contextual factors.’ (Examiner Report – Paper 1, 2018)*

*‘Lower level responses... didn’t always follow the basic approach of quoting an example, analysing it and relating it to research. The middle stage tended to be left out with examples only linked to a theorist (often stating, ‘this proves the theory of...’) but with no accompanying analysis. Higher level answers... demonstrated secure and confident knowledge of a range of theories (both developmental and functional) and were aware of grey areas where a number of theories could be applied or where whole or aspects of a theory could be dismissed based on evidence from the given data’ (Examiner Report – Paper 2, 2017).*

## What theory?

The following section mentions some individual theorists, and some theory areas with discussion of some of the key concepts and names often associated with them. Some of the theorists are frequently named in students’ exam scripts, and brief commentary is provided, where relevant, on strengths and weaknesses in how they are applied; others are less frequently encountered by examiners but have been found to be useful for those students who have encountered them.

### Aitchison

Jean Aitchison’s work on child language acquisition introduced the concepts of ‘labelling’ ‘packaging’ and ‘network building’ as stages in the acquisition of vocabulary and meaning. This can be useful for students trying to explain unusual ways that children apply words, helping to explain *why* children may exhibit features such as over and under-extension.

Aitchison is also a common name referenced in relation to language change, with concepts such as ‘crumbling castle’ and ‘damp-spoon’ very popular, perhaps because of

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<sup>3</sup> Lakoff, R. 2004 [1975]. *Language and Woman’s Place: Text and Commentaries*, rev. and expanded edn, ed. Mary Bucholtz. New York: Oxford University Press. (First published New York: Harper & Row.)



their vivid imagery. So long as students understand that Aitchison uses such terms to refer to popular attitudes to change, rather than as descriptions of reality, or reflecting her own views, they can help students to show understanding of the social as well as linguistic dimension of variation over time.

## **Bernstein**

Basil Bernstein's 'restricted' and 'elaborated' codes remain quite a popular concept to refer to, but rarely as part of an illuminating analysis, perhaps influenced by the unfortunate negative connotations of the word 'restricted'. Students often seem to think that any 'non-standard' language is evidence of a 'restricted' code, which is often seen as intrinsically 'deficient'. It is important to note that all speakers use 'restricted code' where appropriate, and that the distinction between the codes is nothing to do with non-standard or dialect features, but with the range of language features that are used depending on whether there is a socially shared body of knowledge and assumptions that allow much communication to be implicit, or whether features are used that make meaning explicit and unambiguous regardless of the social connections of the participants.

## **Brown and Levinson**

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's work on politeness strategies, built on Irving Goffman's work on 'face'. Key concepts frequently used by students are those of 'negative' and 'positive' politeness, and again the terms sometimes cause confusion with 'negative politeness' sometimes interpreted as 'rudeness', or requiring explicitly negative vocabulary, whereas negative politeness is actually being polite by minimising imposition on the hearer – to use one of their own examples: 'I know it's a lot to ask, but could you lend me a thousand dollars?', by contrast with positive politeness that seeks to build up the hearer's positive face, and emphasise connection with the speaker: 'Heh, mate, can you lend me a dollar?'

## **Child Language theorists**

The 'Getting Started Guide' for this course deliberately recommends that:

*Students should be introduced to relevant developmental, functional and structural theories associated with the development of language. Students should be familiar with a range of theories including the earlier debates of behaviourism, innateness versus nativism, cognitive and interactive theories, and functional approaches. For written language, this should include current methods of teaching literacy.*

This implies that students should have an understanding that research into child language acquisition has moved on since those 'earlier debates', and thus should avoid what is sometimes referred to as 'theory ping-pong' where students spot evidence in data of a child repeating someone else's utterance and claim that this 'proves' Skinner's behaviourist theory. Then identify an example of overgeneralisation as evidence to support Chomsky's innateness theory.

This is not to say that reference to such key figures in the development of the field of Child Language Acquisition (CLA) should be avoided, but that students should be sure to focus primarily on:



- the nature of the data presented
- the language it contains
- what the participants are *doing* with that language, and use, where relevant, their knowledge of CLA theory to show how it helps to explain (or fails to explain) the language features.

Among the concepts that have been found particularly useful to allow the more sophisticated and evaluative approach to the ‘messiness’ of real child language data is that of ‘statistical learning’, associated with **Jenny Saffran**, (who has provided an overview of this field of research available [here](#) which deals with the problem of ‘poverty of stimulus’ identified by Chomsky. It is perhaps worth noting that many advances in the understanding of language acquisition have emerged from the fields of psychology and cognitive neuroscience.

The work of **Michael Tomasello** has been seminal in integrating these fields and, as the blurb to his book *Constructing a Language* puts it, ‘*Drawing together a vast body of empirical research in cognitive science, linguistics, and developmental psychology*’, Tomasello demonstrates that we don’t need a self-contained ‘language instinct’ to explain how children learn language. Their linguistic ability is interwoven with other cognitive abilities.’<sup>4</sup>

Students can very usefully bear this in mind to enable them to integrate their identification of linguistic features in CLA data with the contextual information given, and their own inferential understanding to explore in a subtle way the communicative purposes of children’s language, rather than simply attaching features to pre-determined ‘stages’ of development, which is a common, but limiting, approach.

## Fairclough and theories of power/ideology

Norman Fairclough is too often limited in students’ responses to being the originator of the concept of ‘synthetic personalisation’, usually reduced to the rather banal observation that use of second person pronouns makes the audience feel as if the text is addressing them. Synthetic personalisation is a relatively small element of Fairclough’s work on Critical Discourse Analysis<sup>5</sup> which has been highly influential in exploring how all discourse both emerges from, and in turn encodes and reinforces, ideological positions and power relationships in society.

It is perhaps best thought of as a general approach towards the analysis of how language operates in society to reinforce dominant ideologies, rather than a specific theory or tool of analysis, and many other names such as Althusser and Chomsky are also associated with this perspective. It is this concept, not specific to Fairclough, that is most useful for students to grasp, and an accessible guide aimed at A-level students can be found on the *Englishbiz* website [here](#).

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674017641>

<sup>5</sup> Fairclough, Norman. *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge, 2013



## Gender theorists

Some of the issues with the application of gender theory highlight the need for students to recognise academic research into language and the discourse surrounding it as continually evolving, with people responding to and building on earlier work, rather than seeing theorists as having fixed views that are simply in competition with each other. For example while Deborah Tannen still espouses views that have emerged from her earlier work that is typically characterised as a 'difference model', later work has established that the data in her influential work such as *You Just Don't Understand* (1990) were largely anecdotal and that most of the claimed gender differences have not been found in larger empirical studies.

Similarly, Zimmerman and West's seminal paper *Doing Gender* (published in 1987 but written a decade earlier) was important in developing the debate about gender as a social construct emerging from social (including linguistic) behaviour in a way that is at quite a remove from the typical student representation that they simply believed that because men are dominant, they interrupt more.

Deborah Cameron provided a useful overview of more recent work in language and gender aimed at A level teachers in 2011 (link [here](#)) and continues to write a blog on language from a feminist perspective (link [here](#)).

A useful overview of the development of language and gender studies taken from *The Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, and taking in most of the scholars frequently mentioned by AS-level students, has been made available [online](#).<sup>6</sup>

## Giles

Howard Giles' 'Accommodation Theory' is another example of an important and influential linguistic research that is often oversimplified the point that it ceases to be useful and can indeed cause students to misread what is going on in a text by *only* looking for examples of where a speaker or writer converges towards the recipient (perhaps looking only for examples of using the same word, for example). Giles' work explores in a more subtle way how both convergence and divergence operate, not only between individual speakers in isolation, but as part of wider socio-cultural groups and their interactions and power relationships.

There are close connections between Giles and the issues of power and ideology touched on above with reference to Fairclough, and teaching for the individual variation component of the specification would benefit from a deeper exploration of these issues than students often present. This video interview with Howard Giles offers a good introduction to accommodation theory, and also gives students some insight into academic language research (link [here](#))

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<sup>6</sup> Bucholtz, M. (2014). The Feminist Foundations of Language, Gender, and Sexuality Research. In *Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality, second edition*. UC Santa Barbara. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6cz7k5s8>



## Grice

Grice is perhaps one of the most misunderstood theorists. Reference to ‘Grice’s maxims’ is almost ubiquitous, but rarely used with real insight, with students often treating the maxims as if they were simply instructions on what speakers should do. This is a pity, as, properly understood, the maxims are a powerful analytical tool for explaining one of the most common yet remarkable features of language: how we understand what people mean, even when the literal meaning of the words they use cannot account for what they intend to convey.

Many of the simple presentations of Grice’s theory available online or in A level text books include good examples, but can be easily misinterpreted if the underlying purpose of Grice’s theory is not grasped. There is a sound explanation of Gricean maxims, that also acknowledges criticism of the theory on the Psychology Wiki (link [here](#)) and teachers might be best equipped by going back to Grice’s original paper *Logic and Conversation* which is readily available online.

## Language Change theories

The issues and concepts underpinning language change are perhaps better established than in some other areas of the course, as the study of language history is a longer established academic discipline than other areas of linguistics. As such, many key concepts, such as regularisation, borrowing, semantic change, and so on, are not associated with individual names or with competing schools of thought in the way that some other language issues are. Moreover, some aspects of change can be usefully explored by reference to other areas of the course, so that regularisation, for example, can be seen as the accumulation over time of the tendency of individuals to overgeneralise linguistic rules during the child language acquisition process, some of which will remain ‘uncorrected’.

Perhaps the most useful starting point to get students to think conceptually about the language changes they will identify in data from different time periods is:

- the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors leading to change,
- how these interact.

So for example, there is an intrinsic tendency towards regularisation of plural endings in English, but the application of that principle to the pronoun ‘you’ to give the plural ‘yous’ has not been accepted by most speakers because of the extrinsic social pressure that sees its use as ‘common’ or ‘uneducated’.

Although there is no need for students to attach an academic’s name to every concept they understand and can use to illuminate their analysis, there are of course researchers whose work has enhanced our understanding of language change processes and their social implications.

Aitchison has already been mentioned in this regard, and sociolinguistic work on synchronic variation often sheds light on how and why some changes spread through an entire linguistic community, while other communities may retain forms that have become archaic elsewhere, or may innovate new forms to distinguish themselves from mainstream society, and so on. Some key names whose work is often usefully referenced in this regard are William Labov, Lesley and James Milroy, Jennifer Cheshire and Peter Trudgill.