

AS and A Level English Language



A guide to language frameworks and levels

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Introduction

Mark Boardman, founder of The English Language List and Bridge Fellow in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Huddersfield, has developed the following outline of the language frameworks and levels to guide teachers.

While this is not an A level in Linguistics, and is primarily rooted in the study of the English language, it is important that the students learn accurate and consistent terminology for describing and analysing the texts that they will encounter on the course. The course is descriptive and analytical, and does not prioritise aesthetic judgements in the same way as an English Literature course. Therefore, the most appropriate system, for being accurate and consistent in approaching texts, is the set of analytical methods developed by theoretical and applied linguistics.

Below are outlines of the theoretical areas students will be expected to use in describing and analysing texts. This is by no means an exhaustive guide to any of the areas outlined, but it will ensure that students will have covered all of the appropriate language levels.

Phonetics

This is the study of how the human vocal tract produces sound and of the ways these sounds can be recorded and studied. Phonetics is not specific to a particular language: all humans, given normal physical and cognitive development, are capable of producing the same range of speech sounds – and the International Phonetic Alphabet was developed for the accurate recording of this range of sounds.

Students will *not* be expected to learn the IPA, only to recognise where it has been used and why it has been used. For example, you might see IPA symbols in language acquisition data so that when a child gives the utterance [dɪ] for the word 'drink', square bracketed phonetic transcription is used to show that the child is at a stage of phonetic development in which they cannot reproduce consonant clusters.

If examination data makes use of IPA symbols, a key to these symbols will be provided. Most of the complexities of phonetics are outside the scope of A level, but an awareness of its basic principles is essential to an understanding of first and second language acquisition. A speech sound within phonetic study is referred to as a *phone*. Phonetic transcription is presented inside square brackets.

Suggested key concepts:

- International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)
- phone
- speech organs
- consonant
- vowel
- articulation
- voicing
- nasality
- plosive
- fricative.

Phonology

The distinction between a letter and a phoneme illustrates one important difference between written and spoken English. Although there are only 26 letters (in the written English alphabet), there are 44 phonemes (significant sounds of spoken English). This contributes to the lack of consistency in English spelling as there is not one separate symbol to represent each sound. The dominance of the visual written form also causes a lack of awareness of the way the language actually sounds.

The lack of correlation between written forms and pronunciation is most striking in vowels. The 21 consonant letters correspond quite well to the 24 consonant sounds. But there are only five vowel letters in the alphabet (six if *y* is included) which have to represent 20 vowel phonemes. Thus the same letter is used to represent a number of different sounds, for example:

`a' mat mate mall mare clasp wasp

Conversely, the same sound may be represented by various letter combinations:

/ɔ:/ or core awe ought taught

Phonology deals with how sounds work to create meaning in a particular language or language variety (such as dialect or sociolect). An individual language or language variety will not include all of the sounds the human vocal tract is capable of producing. Also, even if two languages or language varieties

share a similar set of sounds, they will not necessarily use these sounds in the same way to create meaning.

An example is the glottal stop in English. The word 'butter' in many accents of English can either be pronounced [bʌtə] or [bʌʔə] where [ʔ] represents a sound called a *glottal stop* and [t] represents a sound called an *alveolar stop*.

The pronunciation with the glottal stop is popularly referred to as 'dropping' the 't' sound in 'butter' and is typical of many urban accents of English, including Manchester and parts of London. Whether one or other of these two sounds is used in the word 'butter' makes no difference to the meaning of the word: whichever pronunciation is used, it is still recognisably the same word.

A *phonological* transcription of the word 'butter' would generally be /bʌtə/ regardless of how the /t/ is pronounced.

In phonological transcription, each symbol represents a *group* of alternative sounds that the language or language variety will allow in that part of the word. This group of sounds is known as a *phoneme*. Phonemes are written in sloping brackets, to indicate that the transcription is phonological rather than phonetic. Phonetics deals in exact recording of everything the vocal tract is doing. Phonology deals in the meaningful sounds of a specific language or variety.

Suggested key concepts:

- minimal pair
- phoneme/letter
- consonant/vowel
- homophones
- glottal stop
- schwa
- allophone
- segment
- word
- accent
- received pronunciation.

Prosody/suprasegmental features

Segments are the lexically significant elements of the utterance, or in simple terms the words including non-fluency features like 'erm'. Where extra meaning is added by stress, rhythm, pitch, intonation and volume, these are referred to as *suprasegmental features*. An example would be where the stress is placed in these lines from *Hamlet*:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Depending on whether the stress is placed on 'your' or 'philosophy', the meaning of the statement is very different. Another example would be the rising intonation at the end of 'You're going home?' which turns a statement into a question without altering any of the words.

Suggested key concepts:

- pitch
- intonation
- stress
- rhythm
- volume.

Lexis

A phoneme is the smallest unit or building block of a word. The four phonemes in 'butter' combine to create what we recognise as a word in English. Linguists will sometimes refer to words as 'lexical items'. Lexis deals with how words enter a language, how words become obsolete and how a child learns words from the early stages of their cognitive and physical development. Lexical analysis is also important in justifying observations about written, spoken or multimodal style and in making judgements about register – for example, the degree of formality in a written, spoken or multimodal text. Lexical choice is one of the features of spoken language that varies in the UK with geographical region and social factors.

Suggested key concepts:

- lexeme
- derivation
- etymology
- neologism
- dialect
- sociolect
- idiolect
- slang
- jargon
- register
- concrete
- abstract
- polysyllabic
- acronym
- abbreviation.

Semantics

Any observation or judgement related to the meaning of a word, and all the subtle differences in meaning between words, comes under semantics. If a word changes its meaning through time, as in the historically shifting meanings of the word 'gay', this is semantic change. When a child moves from an early use of the word 'brum' to mean all vehicles with four wheels and an engine (lexical overextension) to a later stage where they can accurately point to and identify a car and a van, this is semantic development.

Suggested key concepts:

- hyponym
- synonym
- antonym
- types of semantic change
- connotation
- collocation
- metaphor.

Grammar: morphology

A *morpheme* is the smallest part of a word recognised as having meaning. Morphology deals with the structure of words. Two basic types of morpheme are

free and *bound*. A free morpheme can exist outside the word, as a word in its own right, so that 'help' in the word 'unhelpful' is a free morpheme. The segments 'un' and 'ful', however, are bound morphemes because although they add meaning and we can see how they are related to 'help', they can only exist inside the word. Any observation about the internal structure of a word comes under morphology.

Bound morphemes can also be: inflectional, that is additions to a word to allow it to fit into a specific grammatical contexts and agree with this context in terms of tense, number and/or person (for example cat/cats, walk/walked); or derivational, that is bringing semantic changes to the word (for example changing word class). In the example 'unhelpful', both *un* and *ful* are derivational morphemes. Other examples include 'dis' (which in some varieties is now a free morpheme), as in respect/**dis**respect, or 'able' as in drink/drink**able**.

Suggested key concepts:

- morpheme
- root
- prefix
- suffix
- plurality
- tense
- person
- derivation.

Grammar: syntax

Here we are dealing with structures created by combining words together: phrases, clauses and sentences. One of the most productive ways in which sentences can be described is in terms of complexity. Syntactic complexity relates largely to the number of clauses per sentence that a text has on average. Sentences can be simple (ie contain only one clause), compound (ie clauses linked together by coordinating conjunctions) or complex (ie containing independent and dependent clauses).

Syntax also covers rules for word order and ways in which different classes of word, such as *noun* and *verb*, can be combined. There is an obvious relationship between syntax and morphology in that, for example, a verb requires different endings according to the noun or pronoun that comes before it, ie I go/he goes.

Suggested key concepts:

- phrase
- modification
- clause
- sentence
- co-ordination
- subordination
- declarative
- interrogative
- imperative
- exclamatory
- modals
- deixis.

Discourse

This is about text types and text structure, and is closely linked to the traditional literary concept of genre. The concept of *mode* is relevant here too: texts that

students encounter and study on the course will broadly be spoken, written or multimodal, and each of these text modes will have different discourse conventions – conventions of organisation.

If grammar deals with structure at the level of individual words and sentences, discourse can usefully be seen as structure above the level of the sentence. Two of the most commonly used concepts in analysing written textual discourse are *cohesion* and *coherence*.

Cohesion deals with how sentences link to each other: how we are able to tell that we are not just reading or listening to a series of random sentences. An example would be the two sentences: 'This is my house. I bought it last year.' The pronoun 'it' in the second sentence refers to the noun phrase 'my house' in the first sentence, so that the two sentences are grammatically linked by a principle known as 'anaphoric reference'.

Coherence, on the other hand, is the effect whereby the text creates, lexically and semantically, a world that corresponds to human experience. So if the word 'house' in the first sentence were replaced with the word 'nose', the text would be grammatically cohesive but lack coherence.

Spoken discourse is expected to be similarly cohesive and coherent, but spontaneous speech can also display structural features associated with unplanned exchanges, such as the expectation that an *initiation* should be followed by a *response*. Multimodal texts are often analysed as containing alternating and mixed features of speech and writing, but there is a lot of evidence that multimodal communication is developing unique discourse features of its own.

In their wider reading, students may also encounter the term *discourse* used to mean a type of text typical individuals, groups or organisations use to achieve a specific pragmatic effect. For example, political discourses can be used to assert power, while discourses of gender and sexual orientation can be used to assert solidarity.

Suggested key concepts:

- mode
- linearity
- narrative
- cohesion
- coherence
- exchange structure
- adjacency pair
- overlap
- topic shifts
- framing moves
- non-fluency
- pseudo-speech
- genre convention.

Pragmatics

Lexical meaning and the rules of grammar constitute the *forms* of a language, whereas pragmatics deals with how those language forms are used socially. You encounter someone in a busy corridor and ask them the question: 'Are you going to stand there all day?' The literal *sense* of this is a request for information

about the person's movements but its intended *force* is very different. The immediate effect you are looking for is that they move out of the way and stop blocking the corridor. Over a longer period, the social effect of the question might be that the person thinks of you as quite bad tempered and unpleasant. Far from a simple request for information, what has been performed is a *speech act*.

Idiomatic expressions involving similes and metaphors also come under pragmatics. Written texts that are not transactional but created purely for aesthetic effect, such as novels and poems, need to be analysed using concepts from pragmatics. Forms of multimodal communication that have developed over the past 20 years are rapidly creating their own pragmatic norms not seen previously in traditional spoken or written forms.

Suggested key concepts:

- context
- context dependency
- sense
- force
- Grice's maxims
- entailment
- presupposition
- implicature
- politeness
- irony
- phatic talk
- convergence/divergence.

Graphology

Writing systems are artificial and not naturally acquired, unlike spoken language. Graphology in the study of English language is concerned with how the Roman alphabet has been developed as a writing system for English, and how it continues to be used in print and multimodal forms. The concept of a *typeface* is central to graphology in that different typefaces, such as Times New Roman and Arial, have different pragmatic effects on the reader. In recent years, graphology at A level has also come to be used to refer to aspects of page layout and how pictorial material relates to text on the page. Within first language acquisition, graphology covers early stages in the development of handwriting.

Suggested key concepts:

- grapheme
- typeface
- font
- white space
- logo
- picture.