

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2013

International GCSE Classical Arabic
(4CA0) Paper 01

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Overview of content

This paper is designed to assess students' ability to translate passages of Arabic into English, and vice versa, with accuracy and sensitivity to context, paying careful attention to points of grammar, spelling and punctuation, and adopting an appropriate tone and style of writing.

The paper consists of five compulsory questions:

Question 1 (20 marks)

Translation of a passage from a classical Arabic text written in the medieval period into formal English.

Question 2 (20 marks)

Translation of a passage of contemporary Arabic written in a formal, classical style into formal English.

Question 3 (6 marks)

Adding full vocalisation, including vowel marks and other orthographic signs, to a short extract taken from one of the passages in question 1 or question 2.

Question 4 (30 marks)

Translation of a passage from a contemporary English text into formal Arabic.

Question 5 (24 marks)

Translation of eight sentences from English into formal Arabic, indicating all final vowels. These sentences are devised to test rigorously the students' knowledge of points of Arabic grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary, and their understanding of idiom.

Summary of student performance

There were many students who displayed a pleasing competence in comprehension of the Arabic texts, but the expression of meanings in good clear English remains an elusive quality. A number of students have already developed a fluent style of writing Arabic which is a pleasure to read, though all too often fine phrases are spoilt by imperfect grammar and spelling.

The following points were noted by examiners:

Question 1

- Students lost marks through an unnecessary adherence to the punctuation of the original Arabic text. The English translation needs to use typical conventions of English prose. The sentence length has to be tightly controlled, and a new sentence has to start with a capital letter, as well as finish with a full stop. Most students at the present time do not do this as a matter of course.
- Many marks were lost because students followed the typical Arabic sequence of tenses where many sentences which begin in the past tense can contain clauses which use present tense. In English translation, of course, they must resist the temptation to follow the Arabic tenses. In a story from the past in English, all verbs are put into the past tense, unless there is some direct speech.
- Where students come across an Arabic word whose meaning they do not know in English, they should try to find a suitable paraphrase which will also find credit with the examiners. Gaps left in sentences do not find favour among examiners.
- Where the meaning of a word, a phrase or a sentence is not clear to students, they should try to infer meanings by looking for clues in the surrounding sentences, or in the passage as a whole. Gaps are heavily penalised.
- Many students lost marks through not showing that they understood completely who was talking or who was being spoken to at any given moment in the passage. This was not always easy, but it was part of the challenge of this question.

Question 2

- The remarks made in the first and fourth bullet points, above, apply even more strongly here, where students lost marks by losing meanings in long, meandering sentences, and by following rigidly the Arabic sequence of sentences.
- It is common for modern written Arabic to demarcate sentences with a comma and not, necessarily, with a full-stop. This will not do for a translation into English. The model answers provided, while not perfect, show the kind of changes that students have to make in order to create a proper response in English.

Question 3

- Students generally seemed to perform better on this question this year than they did previously. However, there is still a significant minority of students who know little or nothing about pointing a text in the way demanded by the question.
- Apart from nouns '*mamnu'a min al-sarf*', it was important for students to work out the construction of sentences, and to be sure of the position of subject and object in the sentences.

Question 4

- Many students can write in a pleasant Arabic prose style without resorting to poetry. Marks awarded should be higher than they were this year, but it was most noticeable that even the best writers were capable of making a surprisingly large number of errors of grammar and spelling. Those writers with least experience and confidence in writing usually made an unacceptably high number of basic mistakes, which meant that on this question they were operating well below their potential. They achieved a final mark which may have been below their expectations.
- There are indications that many students leave Q4 to the last stages of the time allowed, on the grounds that they have more confidence when writing in Arabic, and they need to spend more time on the questions where they need to write in English. This is false economy, because the approach does not leave students enough time to re-read, revise and amend the many basic and unnecessary errors in Arabic expression, grammar and spelling.

Question 5

These sentences were meant to be a direct test of students' knowledge of grammar. The following parts of sentences caused the most problems:

- (a) meaning and translation of 'hardly'; correct use of sound masculine plurals; correct use of '*qabla 'an*'.
- (b) use of the past tense question in the negative; meaning of 'set books' in Arabic. Many students thought it meant 'a set of books'.
- (c) how to use any of the '*asma' al-khamsa*' in sentences; use of the dual; use of the conjunction '*qabla 'an*'.
- (d) use of the dual; use of '*kila/kilay*' to emphasise the dual; the correct grammar and use of possessive adjectives and/or pronouns 'their/them'.
- (e) meaning and translation of 'What a'; meaning and translation of 'on his return'.

- (f) meaning and translation of 'peninsula'; use of '*al-maf'ul li'ajlihi*' instead of the ubiquitous particle '*ka*'... .
- (g) use of relative clauses in Arabic and how these correspond to relative clauses in English; use of '*al-mudari' al-majzum*' after '*lam*'; meaning of 'unfortunately'.
- (h) grammar connected with the use of '*kam*'; correct grammar and spelling for second person singular (feminine) past tense verb.

Advice and guidance for preparing students

- Students must improve accuracy in written English with correct and orderly sentence demarcation using full-stop and capital letter.
- They must also improve performance in English by confident use of correct sequence of tenses.
- They must learn to infer from context.
- They must cut out the many errors of spelling and grammar from their written Arabic, and extend and strengthen their knowledge and use of grammar.
- They must learn to revise and check critically their writing in Arabic.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:

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