

## BEGINNING

## 1

# What does language study mean at A Level?

In this unit, you will:

- consider the idea of language study
- explore what it means to be a student of language.

## 1.1 Moving from GCSE to A Level

In your previous studies you have learnt important language skills such as the ability to discuss, debate and analyse, to read and understand texts, and to write in a variety of forms for different purposes. In your A Level course you will build on and develop these skills in a number of ways. For example, you will produce some original writing based on storytelling, persuading or informing, and you will read and explore different text types. But in addition to this, you will learn a range of different skills to help you describe and analyse language itself, and you will acquire an analytical toolkit that will enable you to explore and explain any text. In short, you will learn how to think and act like a linguist, someone who explores language and the contexts in which it is produced in a coherent and methodical way.

## 1.2 Using language to think about language

One useful idea in language study is **metalinguage**, or language about language. The prefix 'meta-' comes from Greek, where it simply means 'after'. However, in English it has come to mean 'about' or 'above' but not in a literal way. For example, a meta-comment might be made when someone makes a

comment about somebody else's comment: "That's a very interesting comment," she commented.' A meta-joke is a joke about jokes:

Knock knock.

Boo.

No need to cry, it's only a joke.

Who's there?

Boo who?



### Key terms

**metalinguage:** language about language

In the same way, metalinguage is the language we use to talk and write about language itself.

Everyday language already has a lot of metalinguage in it. For example, terms like 'word', 'phrase' and 'sentence' are examples of ordinary metalinguage. So are words that refer to variations in people's language, like 'slang' and 'jargon'. Then there are judgemental terms that we can use to criticise people's use of language, such as 'waffle', 'vulgar' and 'drawl'. We have names for many special forms of language, or genres, including speeches, letters and newspaper articles. The dozens of verbs of saying are all part of our ordinary metalinguage: 'mention', 'declare', 'announce'.

Technical metalinguage, or linguistic terminology, is more extensive than everyday metalinguage, and

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can often be used to make distinctions that are not made in ordinary language. For example, in everyday English the term 'dialect' can mean the way someone speaks, depending on whereabouts in the country they come from, including the way they pronounce words as well as the actual words they use. But in language study 'dialect' has a more precise meaning; it refers to the words and grammar that people from different parts of the country use, excluding their regional pronunciations. The term 'accent' is reserved for the way words are pronounced. As a student of language you will need to learn these distinctions, but at the same time to respect the way other people use the terms in everyday language.



See 4.2 for more on dialect and accent

### 1.3 Assessment objectives and what they mean

Five assessment objectives (AOs) are used to underpin A Level English Language courses. These are:

**AO1:** Apply appropriate methods of language analysis, using associated terminology and coherent written expression.

**AO2:** Demonstrate critical understanding of concepts and issues relevant to language use.

**AO3:** Analyse and evaluate how contextual factors and language features are associated with the construction of meaning.

**AO4:** Explore connections across texts, informed by linguistic concepts and methods.

**AO5:** Demonstrate expertise and creativity in the use of English to communicate in different ways.

Language study and language skills are both important for AO1. When you break down and evaluate a text or a set of data you need to make sure you use metalanguage or terminology in a way that is genuinely applicable to it. You also need to make sure that what you write is clear and makes sense.

For AO2 you have to show that you understand the ideas and concepts behind the terminology you use. Basic understanding of terminology might consist of being able to give a simple definition, but for the more challenging 'critical understanding' a student

of language would need to adopt a more critical approach, not just accepting ideas because other people take them for granted but questioning them and challenging their definitions.

The idea of AO3 is that the meaning of a text or an **utterance** depends on the **context**, or information from the setting, as well as on the words and phrases that the text is made up of. For example, the literal meaning of the seemingly complimentary utterance, 'Well done, Sherlock!' might be 'You are very clever.' But if the context is that someone has obviously drawn a wrong conclusion then the real meaning is more likely to be: 'You are not very clever at all.'

For AO4 you will be expected to compare how texts make use of language. When you study textual variations and representations you will be asked to explore similarities and differences in the ways two texts use language. For your original writing non-exam assessment you will make connections between your own text and a style model you have used through a reflective commentary.

AO5 relates to communication and creativity. Students of language continually use their imagination to devise solutions to problems. For example, for your original writing you will be assessed on your ability to express yourself clearly and accurately as well as on your creativity.

Table 1A shows how each assessment objective is mapped across the different parts of the specification.

Table 1A

	AO1	AO2	AO3	AO4	AO5
<b>AS Level</b>					
Language and the individual	✓		✓	✓	
Language varieties	✓	✓			✓
<b>A Level</b>					
Language, the individual and society	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Language diversity and change	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Language in action	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

## A/AS Level English Language for AQA

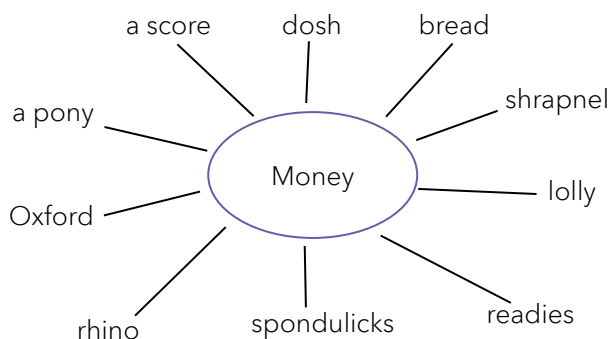
**Key terms****utterance:** a segment of speech**context:** the background against which a text conveys its meaning

## 1.4 What does it mean to be a student of language?

Ordinary metalinguistic terms, like 'slang', might not have technical definitions in language study but, nonetheless, they can be used as starting points for exploring and discussing aspects of language.

The word 'slang' is often used pejoratively to mark out certain words as unacceptable; like 'gobsmacked' for astonished, 'zonked' for tired or 'shirty' meaning bad-tempered. But when you become a student of language you have to take a different approach, not condemning such terms but seeing them as interesting items to study. During your A Level English Language course, you might collect examples of so-called 'slang' terms for money and investigate them. For example, where does 'a quid' meaning a pound come from? Why is money commonly referred to as 'brass' in some parts of the country? How is it that £1,000/\$1,000 is called 'a grand' in both the UK and the USA?

Here are some other terms for money that you might investigate:

**ACTIVITY 1****Everyday metalinguistic terms**

Explore the meanings and the implications of these everyday metalinguistic terms:

- chat
- gossip
- jargon
- slang
- waffle.

What problems do you encounter when you try to define these terms? Is it easy or difficult to agree on a definition? Do people agree about examples of them?

Turning language into something you can study will enable you to learn new skills, such as how to read or listen to a text not just for its basic meaning but also for how it achieves its effects on listeners or readers. Sometimes you will be asked to analyse and evaluate data as well as texts, enabling you to learn how to break information down and evaluate it. Other skills you will develop as a student of language include:

- arguing your case logically and respectfully
- investigating a topic in an objective and rigorous way that will help you, and other people, to understand it better
- expressing your ideas in writing clearly and concisely.

In addition to learning practical skills, perhaps the most important reason for studying language is that it is just so interesting. How does it come about, for example, that children can master all the basics of their native language by the age of 24 months? Why does every generation believe that the language of the younger generation is deteriorating? How is it possible through language to persuade people to risk their lives by going to war? Look, for example, at the way the World War 1 recruiting poster in Text 1A combines language with visual elements to create a powerful effect.

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## Text 1A



Source: National Army Museum, London

The language of the poster cleverly mirrors the illustration: 'the ranks' is illustrated by rows of smart, purposeful, uniformed soldiers facing, and moving, forward under the leadership of an officer and 'the crowd' by a static, disordered, leaderless group of civilians, represented mainly by the backs of the men's heads. The Union Flag, corresponding to the phrase 'your King and Country', is placed symbolically in between the two groups. The reader of this poster is positioned as one of the watching men by conveying the direction and intention of gaze either towards the soldiers or towards the flag with the word 'stare', so that the poster's key message, emphasised by dramatic white-on-black text in large capital letters, has maximum impact.

These and many other fascinating issues are waiting for you to discuss, explore and investigate as you become a student of language.

## ACTIVITY 2

## My language biography

Write an account of your own language biography and share it with others in your class. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- You might begin with your first words if your parents or carers know or can remember what they were.
- What important conversations or discussions do you remember?
- Do you recall listening to any inspiring speeches?
- What books, or other texts, had an effect on you?
- Do you speak a regional variety of English?
- Do you speak any other languages as well as English?
- Why did you choose to study A Level English Language?



## Summary

- A Level English Language will help you to build on language skills you have already learnt.
- For the language study component of A Level English Language, you need to be able to understand and apply metalanguage or linguistic terminology.
- Being a student of language means taking an objective stance on language issues, some of which may be controversial.