**Using *emagazine* to answer exam questions – a no brainer**

**Part One – Language Change (AQA)**

Dan Clayton shows you how you can use the amazing resources in *emagazine* to help you write brilliant answers to questions in your Language exams.

What I’ve done here is to take each of the previous three questions on language change for Paper 2 of the AQA specification and offer some suggestions for the articles in recent (and not so recent) *emagazines* that might have been helpful. We’ll look at the language change questions here.

In part two we’ll look at the diversity questions in the same way.

To access the articles mentioned here, your school or college will need to be a website subscriber. But even without access to the full articles, what follows will give you some good material and ideas to answer questions for Paper 2 of the AQA specification.

To access the articles:

Make sure you have logged in to *emagazine*.(Ask your teacher or librarian for your logins):

<https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/emag-login/>

Click on the link to be taken directly to the article.

(*Please note: As emagazine is a subscription website, the links will not work unless you have already logged in.)*

Here we go for change…

Back in 2017, the first language change question was ‘**Evaluate the idea that language change can be controlled and directed.**’ This is a question that immediately gets into the debate about the nature of language change. Can we control language or is just an unstoppable and inevitable force of nature? If we can exert some control over it, where can we direct it and why would we want to?

The big arguments about prescriptivism are mapped out in Matt Carmichael’s article, [*Up With Which I Will Not Put*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/14812) in *emagazine* 26, December 2004, so this is a good starting point.

For some focus on historical attempts to ‘control and direct’, you could do worse than [Tricia Lennie’s article on the role of the dictionary in setting standards](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/14693%20in) (*emagazine* 28, April 2005).

On a similar theme, Simon Horobin’s article [*Prescriptivist or Descriptivist?*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/20471)in *emagazine* 72, April 2016, looks at usage guides and attempts by language experts at the start of the 20th Century to shape the developing ‘standard’.

Elsewhere, articles by David Crystal ([*Twenty Years that Changed the English Language*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/15561)) Julie Blake ([*Who Needs the Bilious Pigeon?*)](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/14908) and my own one ([*Prescriptivism and Descriptivism – beyond the caricatures*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/15506)) provide discussion of attempts to control and direct the language.

One of the most useful articles of all though is [*Grammar and Change – is correct grammar a myth?*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/17029) by Gill Francis in *emagazine* 66, December 2014.

What’s so good about this article and why is it so useful? One of the things that regularly gets pointed out in the feedback to teachers and students from AQA each year is that you need examples and evidence for your arguments in these essays, rather than just opinionated assertions. This article has examples in spades and Francis makes the point that corpus linguists can use massive databases of real language to track changes in usage so we no longer have to rely on a hunch that something is changing; we can see it in the data. Looking at examples such as ‘fed up of’, ‘I was sat’ and even (shudder) ‘I would of…’, Francis shows how you can build a bank of evidence for different kinds of language change and use these to illustrate the kinds of usage that wind up pedants and prescriptivists.

So, can language change be controlled or directed? I’ll leave the last word to Henry Hitchings, author of *The Language Wars*, whose interview [*At War with the Pedants*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/15323) in *emagazine* 53, September 2011 gives us this line about the direction of flow for the English Language, which looks to me like it could be – with a bit of adaptation – a great conclusion for this essay:

Firstly, the flow doesn't always go where the prophets of doom say it will. Secondly, it's normal to want to resist aspects of change, and resistance isn't futile; we can influence particular changes, retarding or diverting them, but what we can't alter is the fact that change happens.

The 2018 question wasn’t a million miles away from the first one. It was ‘**Evaluate the idea that the English language has been decaying over time and continues to do so.**’

The decay argument is a perennial prescriptivist trope, so the articles mentioned above are all equally useful for this question, and again Henry Hitchings’ interview in *emagazine* 53 is a useful calling point. As Hitchings says, ‘At any moment, there's always something that is particularly exercising prescriptivists. So right now, for instance, you could say it's the use and abuse of apostrophes and maybe also the proliferation of tag questions such as 'innit'. But the fundamental issues haven't changed much: there have long been complaints about new words, the ways punctuation is used, accents, foreign influence on English, and the vagaries of English spelling.’

But ‘decay’ is an idea often linked to Jean Aitchison and her metaphor of the ‘crumbling castle’: a descriptivist linguist’s caricature of how prescriptivists love to complain about the supposed collapse of a once-great language. It’s hard **not** to find students who don’t namecheck or quote Aitchison’s models of the crumbling castle, damp spoon and infectious disease – perhaps slightly harder to find ones who genuinely understand what her own view is – and I sometimes think that the Aitchison metaphors are a bit too… well… meta for many students. So, why not have a look at some other ideas that Aitchison put forward, such as those in her article *Tadpole or Cuckoo?* from way back in 2003?

At one time, language change was assumed to happen slowly and stealthily, like a tadpole growing legs and gradually altering into a frog. Richard Lloyd, a typical nineteenth century worrier, expressed his fear of such creeping changes:

‘We have advanced many steps towards mutual incomprehensibility. For never since Babel have two dialects become mutually incomprehensible at one stroke: the change creeps upon them unawares: and once attained, it is irrevocable.’

But this viewpoint is mistaken. Sounds and words do not gradually 'turn into' one another. Instead, a 'young cuckoo' situation exists. A newer form or meaning develops alongside an older one. The old and the new are typically found side by side for a time, competing against one another. Then the new form may win out and replace the older one, like a young cuckoo getting bigger and bigger, and eventually heaving the original occupant out of the nest.

Perhaps these ideas about the nature of language change help students get a bit closer to the heart of the question. If language isn’t evolving or decaying, what is actually happening to it? I’ll leave the last word on this to John McWhorter. In his [February 2018 interview with *emagazine*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/28030), he was asked if the pace of language change would risk leaving some people behind. His response was: ‘Language change, whatever its rate, is communal, not individual – we talk to each other, and thus it’s only things that afford communication that make it into the flow.’

So, to the most recent question (June 2019): ‘**Evaluate the idea that changes in communication technologies have had a damaging effect on the English language.**’

Defining what we mean by ‘communication technologies’ seems like a good starting point here, so the following articles are all useful for that.

Michael McCarthy’s article [*Changes in English Grammar – the Tortoise not the Hare*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/27435) in issue 78, December 2017 focuses on a range of different factors affecting the language, including technology, while Angela Goddard’s [*Looking Beyond the Label - Mode and New Forms of Communication*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/15702) in issue 64, April 2014 looks in more depth at the kind of shifts in communication style that occur when we move beyond simple binaries of speech and writing into the world of electronic communication.

Online communication is no longer a recent development. Remember Club Penguin? Or Habbo Hotel? Then you’re probably in your late twenties now and would have grown up in a time when MySpace and BeBo were around. So a 2008 article like Mike Thelwall’s [*The Grammar of Instant Messaging and Social Networking Sites*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/15057) might seem like a bit of a relic from the past, but it actually offers some really interesting insights into what researchers were doing with online language over 10 years ago.

And if you want to go even further back than that, David Crystal wrote for *emagazine* issue 11 in 2001 (yes, that’s 2001) on the subject of texting ([*Texting – an Analysis*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/14586)).

Taking a slightly broader angle on technology and language, two articles – one by Claire Hardaker and the other by Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg – consider what might be seen as ‘damaging effects’ on the language (and its users).

Claire Hardaker’s discussion of online abuse picks up many of the themes in her *emagazine* conference lecture in February 2019 and her article, [*The Language of Online Abuse - Seven Forms of Antisocial Behaviour*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/15708)in *emagazine* 64, April 2014 considers how technology allows people to hurt others in new and ever-evolving ways.

Meanwhile Seargeant and Tagg’s article, [*How Online Communication is Changing Friendship and Politics*](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/28043) from *emagazine* 79, February 2018 links people’s use of technologies to wider language practice. One particularly interesting angle they offer goes as follows:

…to claim that the ‘fake news’ epidemic is solely a technology issue – is to overlook how people themselves are using this technology. It neglects any consideration of how people’s own actions may contribute to the situation, and the way that filter bubbles may in fact not simply be a product of the machines, but of human interaction as well.

So, there’s a lovely line to use in response to the June 2019 question: it’s not the technology that’s the problem; it’s the people!

The one piece that stands out as being the most useful for this question is one by [Victoria Elliott in *emagazine* 49, September 2010.](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/articles/15226) It’s an article that offers some really clear examples of research into the effects of new technologies on language and avoids the very broad-brush approach that so many answers fall victim to (even to the point of recycling the tired, evidence-free assertions of those curmudgeonly commentators Humphrys, Self and Sutherland) by looking at some actual data and some real research.

This is the kind of content that teachers are really looking for when they scrawl ‘eg?’ and ‘source?’ over students’ essays. In the article, Elliott refers to different studies into the links between texting and literacy:

To the researchers' astonishment, they discovered that spelling and use of textisms were positively related. Greater textism use was also found in children with a higher reading age and better phonological awareness. It's a complicated relationship between the factors - phonological awareness mediates some of the association between reading and textism use. But even after controlling for phonological awareness, reading, short-term memory and other factors, like the age at which children got their first mobile phone, textism use still accounts for a significant amount of variance in reading ability.

So, here’s another great article that provides material you could slot straight into an essay on the supposedly ‘damaging effect’ of communication technologies.

Finally, in the most recent *emagazine* (issue 85, September 2019), Christian Ilbury discusses his PhD research into the language of online communication and states:

…in my own research on the mobile application and messaging service WhatsApp, I found a lot of evidence to suggest that users make good use of predictive text technologies and are generally very conscious of their spelling and grammar. Like other researchers, I noted that the messages were largely written in standard English.

What he does notice though is when spelling variation does occur, it’s not simply about making a spelling error but is often used to express some kind of deliberate meaning that can’t always be conveyed through the online medium in a conventional way. So, spellings such as *cooooool*, *bbz* and *yaaa* are helping to signal tone and attitude, rather than suggest that the person is functionally illiterate. Is technology damaging language here? Not at all: it’s being used to supplement the language and make it more meaningful in an online context.

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