Using *emagazine* to Answer Exam Questions – A No Brainer: Language Diversity (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.

In this article we'll consider the three most recent Language Diversity questions and look at what *emagazine* has to offer to help you answer them.

The questions have been as follows:

- 2019: Evaluate the idea that language variation has decreased over time.
- 2018: Evaluate the idea that British Standard English is superior to other varieties of English used around the world.
- 2017: Evaluate the idea that a person's language use is completely determined by the social groups they belong to.

Language diversity is a broad area of study and takes in (among other things) accent and dialect, sociolect and occupational language, multi-ethnolects and world Englishes, as well as ideas around how we vary our individual speech styles depending on context and how we choose to perform our identities through language. There's a huge amount of work being done on this by linguists and *emagazine* has been really good at keeping up with much of this. In fact, there's so much, that what's here is only a snapshot of some of the most recent pieces. We'll leave you to explore the archive at your leisure, but you'll find Nikolai Luck's articles here and here very helpful for alerting you to some of the most relevant pieces from his perspective.

If we take the 2019 question as a start, we can see that one significant topic you might want to mention in response to this idea is the concept of **levelling**. Kevin Watson looks at this in his article *More or Less Scouse – Language Change on Merseyside* (*emagazine* 48, April 2010) and notes:

> When linguists have investigated phonological change in other British accents, the overwhelming discovery has been that certain regionally distinctive pronunciation features are gradually disappearing and are being replaced by 'supralocal' features - features which are not just found in one local accent but are much more widespread.

Watson goes on to look at dialect levelling more broadly (the same process but happening to other aspects of a dialect, not just its phonological features) and observes that much of the work on language over the last 20 or 30 years supports the notion that dialect levelling is occurring in the UK. So, what about Scouse? According to Watson, that's going the other way: Scousers are becoming more Scouse.

> …the Liverpool accent is maintaining, or even extending, at least some its regional pronunciation features. Why is this happening? The answers are not yet fully understood, but it seems that a number of issues may be relevant. It may be that there is covert prestige associated to some of these features. Although to outsiders having a fricative for /k/ might sound like a speaker has a bad case of flu, to insiders - to Scousers - such a pronunciation is a marker of association, a badge of identity which distinguishes them from other people.

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Covert prestige is a concept that many of you will have come across on your course, but to summarise briefly, it's the idea that certain forms of language behaviour carry social connotations suggesting a kind of outsider cool or rebellious, anti-establishment stance. If **overt prestige** is what polite society says is the accepted way to speak, covert prestige is its edgy cousin.

There's plenty to think about here and if you throw Multicultural London English (MLE) into the mix, there's another case for arguing how the direction of travel for language in the UK is not simply one way – a flattening and levelling out of difference – but also one of innovation and creation, people using language to express a regional and social identity. Sometimes that identity is about a pride in where you come from and who you are, but often (and sometimes as well) it's about expressing an opposition to other, more mainstream, identities. We all know that language is used to communicate, but it communicates much more than simple facts; it's about social attitudes too.

In her article on QMUL's new A level English Language 'Teach Real English' resource site (in *emagazine* 83, February 2019) Devyani Sharma looks at the growth of MLE but also the parallel growth of English as a world language at the expense of other languages. Sharma concludes by saying:

> …we might predict a continued decline in linguistic diversity and language shift towards 'mega-languages' (a decline in multilingualism) alongside a rise in the diversity of sub-types of these languages and complex competence in these varieties (a rise in multilectalism).

Getting to grips with this kind of bigger picture evaluation is what you need to do to hit the very top of the mark scheme and this is exactly the kind of approach that allows that. Pulling us in one direction are forces that make languages and language varieties more similar (often steamrolling over smaller world languages and local varieties), but at the same time, competing forces are pulling us in another direction because English exists in so many different and varied forms around the world and these forms of English are developing a long way away from the gravitational pull of Standard English norms. In this world of competing forces, we can all become more competent style shifters, as we negotiate the diversity of English varieties. Ironically, for a language that originated in England, its main developments are taking place a long way from England and among people who speak other languages. So, you could argue that language diversity is both increasing and decreasing in many different ways and the future belongs to those who can navigate their way through these diverse forms.

Other articles that might help with this are:

Linguicide - languages under threat (*emagazine* 20, April 2003)

Style-shifting – The Curious Case of MLE and the Interview Candidates (*emagazine* 77, September 2017)

Accent and Phonological Change, Language change, accent modification (*emagazine* 58, December 2012)

The 2018 question ('Evaluate the idea that British Standard English is superior to other varieties of English used around the world.') allows you to bring in another dimension to your response, that of attitudes to language variation. While linguists will almost always argue that differences between varieties do not make one variety better or worse than another, that is not always the case among the general public or even the users of particular varieties themselves.

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On a UK level, articles by Erin Carrie, Lauren Hall-Lew, Shaun Austin & Paul Kerswill, William Barras and Ben Farndon, all look at how accents and dialects are judged and the effects this can have.

Erin Carrie – a speaker at our February 2020 *emagazine* English Language conference – writes about research into accent attitudes in her article *Stereotypes and Stigma, Pride and Prejudice – The Social Side of Accents* (*emagazine* 84, April 2019). She explains:

> There are not only differences when it comes to accents in the UK; there are hierarchies. On the one hand, we tend to talk about 'standard' accents which are spoken by a very small but often more privileged portion of the population. These are typically based on the speech norms of the South East of England and are usually promoted in education and via the media. On the other hand, we talk about 'non-standard' or 'regional' accents which are spoken by the majority of the population and often associated with those who are lower down the social scale.

Ben Farndon's Rural Voices article (*emagazine* 52, April 2011) focuses on how people judge the accents of rural areas, including the South West:

> …the 2005 BBC Voices project suggested negativity towards such an accent from the very users of this variety: over a quarter of the people from the South West who talked to the BBC in the survey said they didn't like, or at least weren't proud on their accent. Comments were received of the accent making the speaker 'sound thick' with 'the impression that I have straw coming out of my mouth' and 'everyone thinks we are country people and live in a barn.'

William Barras focuses on media representations of UK accents and dialects in his piece Accentuate the Positive? Media Attitudes to Accent Variation (*emagazine* 65, September 2014) while Shaun Austin and Paul Kerswill's article *She's Proper Good Innit* (*emagazine* 61, September 2013) offers discussion of dialect discrimination and the different forms of 'prestige' that accents can have.

Lauren Hall-Lew's presentation at the *emagazine* conference in 2016 is featured here and a connected article on research methods (*emagazine* 74, December 2016) might offer you the chance to carry out your own small-scale study.

But, the other angle suggested by the question is an international one, so it's worth casting the net a bit wider to think about what could be covered here. What is British Standard English? Is it even a thing? If so, how might it be defined? If it does exist, surely it's good to have a standard, so everyone can communicate, right?

These ideas are all central to *World Englishes, English as Lingua Franca, Global English…* (*emagazine* 61, September 2013) by Jane Setter, which is an excellent starting point for any survey of English beyond the UK.

Tim Marr also addresses many of these questions in his article *'Here, Even the Beggars Speak English!' English and the Question of Language Prestige* (*emagazine* 72, April 2016). He notes that while English is viewed as carrying a degree of prestige in many parts of the world, it has not always had that much prestige in its own country (being overlooked for Latin and French for several centuries) and that its prestige and 'symbolic capital' – its worth and its value in conveying prestige on its users in the 'messy marketplace' of world communication and trade- is not always fixed.

He concludes his article by saying:

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> …ideas about language prestige are in a state of constant flux, whether this is immediately visible or not. In 'super-diverse' contexts such as London, Manchester or Los Angeles, and in an era of instant communications and global movement, the tendency towards instability and rapid change becomes even more marked. Language itself often changes quickly and unpredictably – but so do ideas about language, and the prestige, or lack of it, that attaches to certain ways of speaking.

So, while Standard British English might open doors for people now, it might not in ten years' time. What might the future hold for other varieties of world English or even English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)?

Finally, to the 2017 question ('Evaluate the idea that a person's language use is completely determined by the social groups they belong to.'). I'll keep this brief because an article I wrote back in *emagazine* 81, September 2018 had this question very much in mind. The 1st part of the article in *emagazine* 80 might also be useful to have a look at.

Elsewhere, TV broadcaster and author of 'Modern Tribes', Susie Dent was interviewed in *emagazine* 76, April 2017 about the sociolect of different groups.

As you can hopefully see, there's plenty of good material in *emagazine* to help you get to grips with these questions. While your teachers will provide you with plenty of ideas, and there are text books and other sources all around you, don't forget that in many cases the articles in *emagazine* are written with you in mind and are focused directly on many of the questions you're being asked. They're for you, so make use of them!

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