English Language A-Level Bridging Unit 2021

You're thinking about studying English Language at A Level – fantastic! The activities in this booklet will give you a taste of what might be in store for you as a student of this subject and you might be surprised quite how different it is to the English you've been doing so far in your time at school.

Some of the activities ask you to step back and think about the nature of language and communication (in all its forms – not just writing), while others encourage you to try out some different ways of approaching your learning – whether that's reading, writing, discussing or listening to others. The activities will prepare you for the kinds of work you would do on the English Language A-Level course and will hopefully be interesting in their own right.

Mr Webster

Complete every part of tasks 1 and 2, then choose whether to option task a, b or c of task 3.

Task 1: An Introduction to Contextual Concepts

Context, Audience and Purpose

a) **Look at text 1 below and write down your answers to the following questions:**

- **Who might have written this text?**
- **What was their motivation for doing so?**
- **Why did they do it?**
- **Who were they intending to read it?**

This note was found in a shared kitchen space in a large company. It was attached to a cupboard door where employees keep their personal mugs for hot drinks.

Context, Audience and Purpose - Text 1

PLEASE READ!!!

If you are the person who keeps stealing my mug (you know, the bright blue one with lots of colourful dogs on the side), please would you **STOP** it!!

Or, at least have the decency to wash it up and bring it back!!

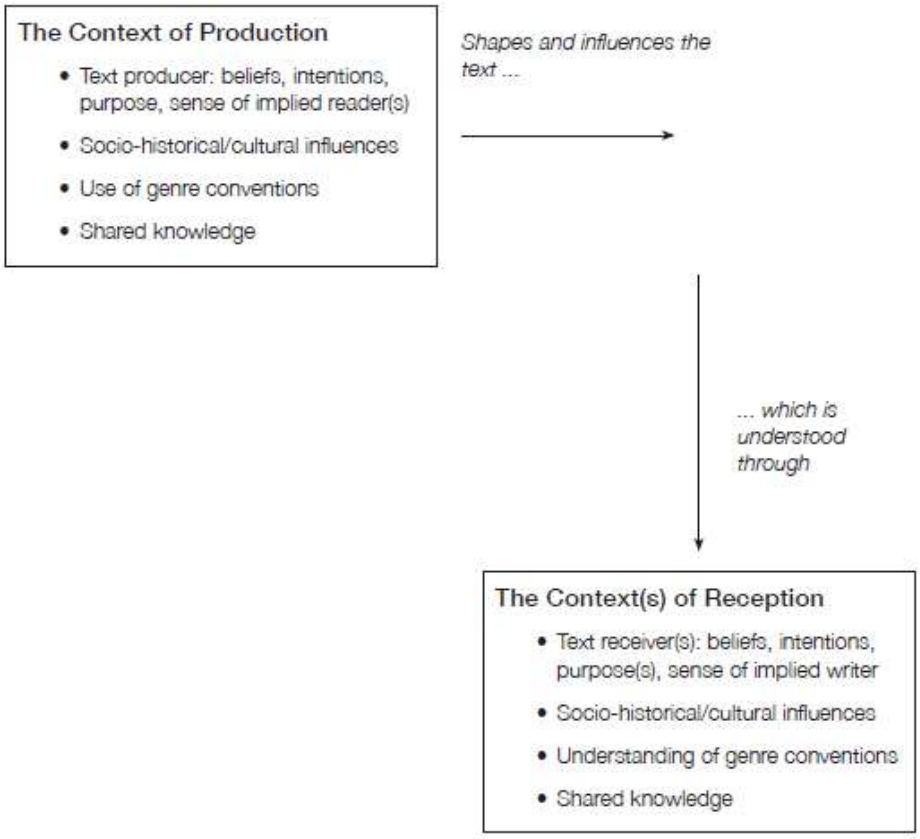
Please be warned that I am **very scary** and **very fed up** – so if I find out who you are, you're in big, big trouble.....

All texts have writers/speakers (or **text producers**) and readers/listeners (or **text receivers**). The beliefs, intentions, motivations and knowledge of text producers play a role in determining the language choices he or she makes. These all form part of a text's **context of production** along with broader more external factors such as the period in which the text was written (the **socio-historical/ cultural context**) and aspects of genre. Equally, the beliefs, intentions, motivation and knowledge of a text receiver, in addition to the situation in which reading or listening takes place, form the **context of reception** and influence the meaning a text receiver takes from a text.

So, **context** is the term used to cover the wide range of influences on either the production of a text or the way it is likely to be interpreted. In text 1, the context of production includes all of the motivating factors behind the writer's decision to place the note in the kitchen cupboard, the reason why she made the decisions she did and any other external influences. In this sense, the context includes an aspect of a text's **purpose** (why it was written) and an understanding of its likely **audience** (who will read it). The fact that producers often have readers in mind is important. In the case of text 1, the text producer has an intended audience in mind (what we can term an **implied reader**). However, the **actual reader** of the message may well be different. Equally, although a reader may have ideas about the kind of person who wrote the message (the **implied writer**), the **actual writer** may, of course, be very different.

In fact, a text may have many different possible contexts of reception depending on who the actual reader might be. This is certainly true of text 1: think about the different meanings that might occur when it is read by the person responsible for using the mug and someone else picking up on the humorous way in which the message is written. And what about the reader who misses the humour and takes the 'threat' of the message seriously? You can see from these possible interpretations how beliefs, intentions, motivations and knowledge all play a role in shaping a sense of meaning and consequently can explain the concepts of **multi-audience** and **multi-purpose** texts.

It's also useful to remember that is some situations, text producers and receivers share the same physical context (this is true in face to face conversations where participants are both producers and receivers and, for example, in a situation where your friend passes you a handwritten note). In other cases, producers and receivers are located in different physical contexts, often in different time periods (think about reading a nineteenth-century poem!). In both cases, however, producers and receivers rely on both their understanding of the conventions of the text's **genre** and on more general **shared knowledge** to help them communicate effectively (see the diagrammatic representation of this on page 9).



b) Have a look at texts 2 and 3 below. For each text, answer this question in detail in your notes:
- What shared knowledge must the text producer and receiver(s) have for any communication to take place?

Context, Audience and Purpose – Text 2
This is the opening of the poem 'To Autumn' by the nineteenth-century poet John Keats.
Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun

Context, Audience and Purpose – Text 3
This is a conversation between two friends. They are talking about a TV programme that aired the previous evening.

Key: (.) indicates a brief pause

A: Great episode last night

B: yeah much better than the last one (.) funny guy (.) top stuff as always (.)

beats that BBC rubbish

A: did your mum enjoy (.) she feeling better now

B: OK yeah (.) still bit sore after crash though

In a text, a text producer's decision to choose one particular word over another is significant. For example in text 4 below, the choice of the word *scintillating* is taken at the expense of a number of potential others. To test this, try replacing scintillating with a word that has a similar meaning and then with a word that has a very different meaning – how do you think this would alter the message that the text producer is attempting to convey?

Consequently, we can say that text producers make decisions about the likely impact of their choices that they hope will be picked up by text receivers, who in turn will attach some kind of significance to a choice a text producer has made.

c) For each text, 4 to 8, write down in your notes:
- **Who might have written this text?**
- **What was their motivation for doing so?**
- **Why did they do it?**
- **Who were they intending to read it?**

Then, annotate for which words or phrases led you to answer the questions above. When you have done this, label the word class of each of these words. You may need to use a dictionary to help you with this! Challenge: Can you spot any patterns in each writer's use of language?

Text 4

Our products are a scintillating range of top quality workmanship

Text 5

Harrison hits hard ground as Haye's the heavyweight king

Text 6

Cut the chicken into strips. Fry and then add the onions and peppers. Put the tomatoes into the pan and then follow with the herbs.

Text 7

We believe in top quality education. We believe in your child's education. We believe in your child.

Text 8

Whilst our rivals are still using tatty sponges and dirty buckets of water, Round-developers use the cutting-edge technology of a reverse osmosis waterfed pole system.

Task 2: Language diversity

a) **Read the article below and highlight 10 key things you learn or find interesting.**

b) **Write a magazine or newspaper article in which you express your opinions about whether people are stereotyped or judged based on their accent. You should aim to use some ideas from Trousdale's article to support your own ideas. You should aim to write at least 2 pages.**

Accent and dialect - Northern English

Northerner and linguist Graeme Trousdale separates out the myths and prejudices from the realities of northern English, at the same time as recognising that categorising identities is part of the way we understand linguistic behaviour.

A State of Mind?

It's a difficult thing, working on accents and dialects of English, if you come from northern England like I do. As an academic who works on varieties of English, I strive to show that all varieties are linguistically equal, with no accent or dialect being inherently better than any other; as a northerner, I know that northern English is the best accent of the lot, no matter what academics think. It all boils down to this. There are two groups of people in the world: those who have a northern English accent, and those who wish they did!

Defining 'northern English

But what is 'northern English', exactly? If we ignore any sociolinguistic variation within the north, and try to concentrate just on a traditional, regional definition of a 'dialect', we run into problems. What land mass corresponds to the area in which northern English is spoken? Historically, for instance, much of lowland Scotland could legitimately be considered part of the linguistic north, given what we know about the early history of English, and the similarities between the dialects of the far north of England, and those of southern Scotland. But because political boundaries and social groupings have formed and reformed since the Anglo-Saxon period, we have to recognise that geography alone cannot serve to delimit linguistic varieties. An alternative approach is to consider individuals, and the identities that they project, partly through their linguistic behaviour. The critical issue here is one of identity as action: your identity is not a reflection of what you are, but rather the outcome of what you do. It is agentive, and manifests itself in many ways, from the clothes that people buy, the music they choose to listen to, and the language that they speak.

Multilingual northerners

Multilingualism is perhaps the most obvious way of illustrating this, and many northerners are multilinguals. Sometimes the context of the speech act, or the social and linguistic background of the participants in the discourse, will determine what language speakers use: a community language at home with grandparents, for instance, but English in the classroom. However, we also find speakers exploiting their linguistic repertoire by varying the language they use even when the context and participants remain constant: a group of teenagers from Preston might well create a variety which appears to be a jigsaw of English, Urdu, Bengali and other languages when engaged in informal talk. Such speakers don't need to be fluent in all of these languages; some may only know a handful of Bengali words and phrases, but drawing on even this limited knowledge can be enough to indicate group membership, to show that you belong. Patterns of crossing, to use Ben Rampton's term, are a regular feature of the linguistic behaviour of multilingual speakers in communities both within northern England and beyond. This crossing is a way of marking identity.

What holds for languages also holds for dialects. Speakers project aspects of their identity by drawing on the range of 'Englishes' that they know - Tyneside English, Northern English, British English and so on. For instance, in any particular speech event, a speaker from Newcastle might say house (with a diphthong) rather than hoose (with a monophthong), but, in words like bath and dance, still retain a low front vowel (as most speakers of English have in cat) rather than the low back vowel associated with southern speech. Thinking about this in terms of local and supralocal poles, we'd say that the speaker is locating himself or herself in the middle of this cline - he or she may be perceived as having a 'General Northern' accent, rather than a heavily localised variety. In another speech event, the same speaker may use many more 'Newcastle' variants, in which case the speaker is located closer toward the 'local' pole. Again, this linguistic behaviour is tied in with the projection of a particular kind of identity, from local Geordie to supralocal northerner. In my own research on Tyneside English, some of the older speakers I talked to were lamenting the fact that younger speakers from the north-east didn't talk 'proper Geordie' anymore. This view was not upheld by the younger speakers, who took great pride in speaking Geordie - they just considered themselves to speak modern Geordie. For many (including many people from the north-east) this modern Geordie is not as distinctive from other accents as it used to be, and this process of dialect levelling has been attested for other dialect areas in surveys carried out in the British Isles. But even if we accept the claim that local varieties are not as distinct as they were, the concepts of 'northerner' and 'northern English' remain.

Categorising and stereotyping

How are such concepts formed in our minds? One of the ways in which our minds work is that we create stereotypes - it's an unfortunate but necessary by-product of our human ability to categorise. Our minds are constantly categorising, placing things into larger groups, based on what we perceive to be similarities among different entities. Stereotypes function as abstract members of the social categories we store in our minds; we identify attributes that we associate with the categories, and the more attributes a given instance of a particular category has, the more we consider that instance to come close to the stereotype. In terms of social categorisation, these attributes can be to do with the way in which people dress, the kind of music they like, and the kind of language they speak, which we've also seen to be influential in the projection of identity. So identity and stereotypes are closely linked in speakers' minds.

All of you reading this will have a social category of 'northern Englishman', for instance, a category which you've built up through experience, as a result of encounters with men from northern England. These encounters vary massively in kind, of course: part of your category of 'northern Englishman' might have been constructed on the basis of your dad being from York; another part constructed because you've seen Ant and Dec on the television; another part because you've heard Steven Gerrard be interviewed after he has played for England, and so on, over potentially tens of thousands of instances of northern Englishmen you've encountered, however briefly. Your category of 'northern Englishman' will be unique to you, because no-one else in the world has had exactly the same experiences as you have. This is why your concept of 'northern Englishman' can't correspond directly to a person in the 'real world': it is abstract, part of your mental make-up. And what's true of 'northern Englishman' as a social category is equally true of 'northern English' as a linguistic category. Just as you encounter and categorise speakers, you encounter and categorise speech. This is why northern English is a state of mind.

Prejudice and comedy

Sometimes, however, this social and linguistic stereotyping is based on very little evidence indeed, and this can result in prejudice. Let's take a more specific category, 'Yorkshireman', and an aspect of the language associated with Yorkshiremen, the phrase 'Eeh bah gum'. I don't think I've ever heard a Yorkshireman say 'Eeh bah gum'. Yet this has become such a stock Yorkshire phrase that a story on The Sun's website, detailing the fondness of Brad Pitt and his wife for the soap opera Emmerdale, set in the Yorkshire Dales, had the headline 'Jolie bah gum, Angelina'. 'Eeh bah gum' has now passed into folklore, and has become entrenched as a marker of Yorkshire speech with the result that it works as a stereotyped linguistic form that invokes a stereotyped social category.

Such stereotypes regularly feature in comedy portrayals of the north. Here is a transcript of part of a famous Monty Python sketch, where Michael Palin, Eric Idle, Graham Chapman and Terry Jones are dressed in white tuxedos, drinking white wine, against a background of a beautiful coastline:

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: Aye, very passable, that, very passable bit of risotto.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: Nothing like a good glass of Château de Chasselas, eh, Josiah?

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: You're right there, Obadiah.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Who'd have thought thirty year ago we'd all be sittin' here drinking Château de Chasselas, eh?

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: In them days we was glad to have the price of a cup o' tea.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: A cup o' cold tea.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Without milk or sugar.

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: Or tea.

The sketch then descends into madness as each of the Yorkshiremen tries to outdo the others by recounting how difficult his life was while growing up. Much of the humour derives simply from the exaggerated accounts of hardship, but there is also humour in the incongruity of discourse topic and linguistic forms - the affluence associated with the discourse on risotto and fine French wine, combined with the non-standard grammar (thirty year, them days, we was glad) and Victorian names. This incongruity is marked too by what appears to be a mismatch between the way the characters are dressed (white tuxedos) and the way they speak (with Yorkshire accents). But why a Yorkshire accent? Why not one associated with London, Bristol, Plymouth, or Norwich? Again, the humour derives in part from wider cultural knowledge (or rather, assumptions) about a typical Yorkshireman, playing on the stereotype that it's grim up north. (After all, why should white tuxedos and a Yorkshire accent seem like a mismatch?)

This links to a wider, institutional stereotype: the portrayal of the north as 'other'. This is part of the cultural norms of much of the British media, which is both metrocentric (focused on cities) and austrocentric (focused on the south). These terms are used by Katie Wales to describe the way in which the history of English has often been analysed by linguists, but they are true too of much of the British establishment. For instance, the BBC News website in 1999 reported the decision of the Oxford English Dictionary to include the exclamation 'Ee', considered to be a northern form, in revisions to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, as follows: Ee bah gum, it's in t'dictionary By 'eck! Them daft 'apeths at t'Oxford Dictionary have gone all northern. If that were true, what a wonderful world it would be.

Task 3: Investigating Language

Choose one of the tasks below to complete: option A, B or C.

Option A: Your Language Profile

Create a 'language profile' of yourself by answering the following questions and then writing them up as a set of bullet points that highlight what you think are the most interesting and important aspects of the language you use:

o What's your earliest language memory? Can you remember a nursery rhyme, song or picture book from when you were very little?

o Have your family or extended family kept any records – video, audio, family memories – of any of your earliest words?

o Have you kept any old school books from when you were learning to read and write?

o Where were you born and where in the UK, or the wider world, are your family from? Go back a few generations if you like and think about any other languages that your family members might speak, or other places your family members might have lived.

o Are there any words or expressions only you or your family use, which others don't really understand?

o Do you or your friends at school use language in any ways that you notice as being different from other people around you? These could be other people in your year, your teachers, your family, whoever.

o Do you listen to or watch anyone on TV, online or in films or music videos who uses language in a way that interests or annoys you?

o Do you ever look at or hear someone else using language in a way that you find is totally new or strange to you?

o Have your teachers or family ever talked to you about the way you speak?

OR

Option B: Do We Need New Words?

The English language is always generating new words. New words can be created out of nothing (neologisms) or be formed by using other words – or parts of words – together in new combinations (what are called compounds and blends). Sometimes initials of words in a phrase might be used (acronyms and initialisms) and you might also see parts of words being added to the front or end of another word to give it a new form (prefixes and suffixes). The A Level English Language course looks at how and why new words are formed, but there is also debate about whether we need new words and when (or whether) they should appear in dictionaries.

• Look at the list of some of the new words that have appeared (or suddenly become much more popular) in English over the last few years below.

• Have you heard of these words before? Have you used any of them? Tick the relevant columns for each word.

• Choose two words from the list that you think are an important addition to the language. Try to come up with a sentence or two explaining why they are so important.

• Then choose two words from the list that you think are pointless and insignificant. What's the problem with these words and why do you think they shouldn't be included? Again, write a sentence or two explaining your thinking.

• Are there any other new words – or new meanings for older words – that you have heard about? Perhaps you could make a note of new and interesting uses of words over the next few months.

• What are your predictions for the most popular and widely-used words for the next 12 months?

Word	Definition	Have heard/seen this word being used	Have used this word myself
Gaslight	To manipulate or trick someone by pretending that they cannot trust what they see or hear until they doubt their own sanity.		
Twerking	A way of dancing that involves bending forward and shaking or thrusting your buttocks in a rhythmic motion.		
Dadbod	A term used to describe the typically flabby and unsculpted male physique that most dads have.		
Cancel culture	A way of describing the movement to 'cancel' - to publicly disapprove of and then attempt to ignore - celebrities or organisations because of their perceived immoral or unpopular actions.		
Climate strike	A protest in which people leave work, school or college when they should be attending to take part in a protest about climate change.		
Influencer	A person who uses social media to promote a particular way of life or commercial products to their online followers.		
Nonbinary	A word describing a sexual identity that does not conform to binary categories of male and female.		
Hamsterkaufing	Stockpiling food like a hamster storing food in its cheeks (from German)		
WFH	Working From Home		
Mansplaining	A patronising way of explaining something (by a man to a woman).		

OR

Option C: Language Fingerprints

As you learn more about language use, you'll start to see that everybody has their own unique language style. Lots of things influence this – where we're from, how old we are, the type of work we do and our interests, our family backgrounds and our own individual personalities – but we all have what's called an idiolect (an individual language style). It's not quite the same as a fingerprint, but there are some similarities. And while detectives can use fingerprints to track down individuals, forensic linguists can also use this idea of individual language style to identify people, or aspects of a person's background.

This activity puts you in the role of a language detective trying to solve a crime. The police need your help to work out who might have sent an abusive social media message from an anonymous account to a local politician. They have three suspects in custody and your job is to offer a view on which one you think is most likely to have sent the message, based on possible language clues.

- **Read Exhibit 1, the abusive message that the police are investigating. Is there anything that stands out in this message as being potentially interesting about how language is being used?**
- **Social media messages about the same issue which were used to identify three suspects. Read through these in turn, again making a note of anything that strikes you as interesting about how language is being used.**
- **Based on this small amount of data, have you got any suggestions about who might have sent the abusive message? Write a short police report explaining your thoughts. Try to pin your thinking down to specific bits of language evidence in the data.**

Data sets

Exhibit 1: the abusive message

Hope your really proud of yourself for what you done but you gotta no that one day your gonna get payback!!! We have had enough of politicians like you not listening to us, you should of listened!!! Watch your back

Suspect 1's social media message

I don't like what's been happening in this area since the new housing development started. This used to be a nice place to live!!! I'm so disappointed in are local representatives for not sticking up for us!!!

Suspect 2's social media message

When are local councillors gonna realise that they should of been standing up for us and not for they're mates in the big building firms, these people are gonna make a fortune from this

Suspect 3's social media message

Your joking! Are they seriously going to build 200 new houses on the fields up by the hospital?! That is crazy. There's not enough facilities for the rest of us at the moment. Madness!!!