What are language features, and what are they doing in my text?



Hilde Hasselgård

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UNIVERSITY
OF OSLO

Why focus on language features today?

English teacher 1

Ang engelsk 1 eksamensoppgave del 1 om "language features". I vår lærebok brukes dette begrepet nesten ikke i det hele tatt Hva legger dere i begrepet? Hvordan "drille" elevene på dette? Hvilke ressurser bruker dere for å forberede elever på denne delen av eksamen?

1

English teacher 2

Dere bruker kanskje "rhetorical devices", som jo både består av litterære og språklige virkemidler, hvor forskjellen mellom dem noen ganger kan være litt ukla...

My English 2 students often struggle with the difference between literary devices and language features. It doesn't help that an online search often gives conflicting information. Does anyone have any handy definitions up their sleeve...?

English 1 teachers: task 1 of the exam has been changed from "*language features and/or literary devices*" to "*language features and/or structural features*". And gone are the speeches, and in with opinion pieces. What confuses me is: can students still comment on literary devices? Can these somehow be a part of the language features? How do you interpret this change in the phrasing of task 1?

Abstract for this talk

The exam questions for English 1 and 2 often ask pupils to identify language features and structural features of a text. The lecture aims to outline what kind of lexical, grammatical and structural features may be relevant in such tasks, and how they can be described. Examples from different types of texts will be given throughout.

In the meantime…

Udir has issued new sample tasks for English 1 and 2.
Mainly same content – different wrapping, but possibly signals of new types of texts to be analysed.

Inew outline: consider language features from a communicative perspective; discuss the “traditional” type of analysis and then take a good look at the sample tasks recently published by Udir. Main focus on English 1, but English 2 is very similar.

Linguistic features, communication, and context

- Communication takes place in a context.
- Writers/speakers have something to communicate to readers and hearers in particular situations.
- Different situations and communicative needs require different registers (genres) of language, including different style levels.
- ”All speakers use language in different contexts, under different circumstances, for different purposes. Those patterns of behavior cannot be derived from any linguistic phenomena. In contrast, the linguistic differences among registers can be derived from situational differences, because linguistic features are functional.” (Biber & Conrad, 2019, p. 8-9).
- In other words, linguistic features are in the service of the communicative needs of the speaker/writer and the format of the communication.

Language choices

- [S]peakers do not go round producing de-contextualized grammatically correct sentences: they have reasons for saying something, and for saying it in the way they do. (Thompson, 2014, p. 9)
- We use language to
  - talk about things in the world
  - interact with other people
  - organize our messages in ways that indicate how they fit in with the other messages around them (ibid., p. 28)
- In analysing language, we
  - investigate what kinds of wordings we can use to express these meanings
  - match meanings and wordings (ibid., p. 9, 29)

Functional view of language in Norwegian curricula and exams

- A view of language as communication.
- The belief that language choices are not random, but connected to the context in which a text is produced.
- A coupling of linguistic form and communicative purpose.
- Core elements in the curriculum:
  - Communication refers to creating meaning through language (…).
  - Language learning refers to developing language awareness and knowledge of English as a system, and the ability to use language learning strategies. Learning the pronunciation of phonemes, and learning vocabulary, word structure, syntax and text composition gives the pupils choices and possibilities in their communication and interaction.

“Language features” in Udir documents

- Information to the students in exam materials (my translation):
  - The tasks require that you have understood the content and message of the text you are reading, and that you show an understanding of how the language is used to convey this message. What language features (‘virkemidler’) are relevant for comment will depend on the attachment to the task, and you should choose which ones you would like to refer to and evaluate in your answer.
- From the assessment guidelines:
  - Language features are a collective term for various techniques that are used in language to create a particular effect, such as evoking feelings or making the text more interesting and convincing.

Some elements to consider



- Language features = language.
- Language features are chosen according to the type of message, register (genre), communicative purpose and target group.
- *Relevant* language features for the analysis are central in communicating the message.
- They are often striking and noticeable, but can also be more subtle.

Task 1 in English 1: Wordings in previous exams

- **1A** [E.g. “The attached text is an opinion piece / a song / a news report”.] *State what the main message of the text is*.
- **1B** *Explain how language features and text structure are used to enhance the message in the attached text*. Use relevant terminology and refer to examples from the text in your answer.
- Alternative wording 1B: *Comment on and explain the effects of some of the language features* and/or literary devices used in the text to enhance the message. Use examples from the text in your answer.

Skills potentially acquired in working with language features



NOTICING →

LANGUAGE AWARENESS



REFLECTING →

CRITICAL READING
CRITICAL THINKING



TAKING OWNERSHIP →
CREATIVE
WRITING/SPEAKING

Reflecting on vocabulary

- **General topics and meanings**: Do the words reflect a particular topic, for example sports, books, politics, geography or gaming? Are the words easy or difficult to understand for the intended readers? Do the words have general or specific meanings? Has the writer used slang? Is there technical terminology?
- **Formal/informal style**: Does the text have a formal, informal or neutral tone? What are the words and phrases that make it formal or informal? How does the style suit the communicative purpose of the text?
- **Literal vs. figurative language:** Are there examples of creative or figurative language use, such as metaphors? Do the metaphors reflect the writer's / speaker's message? Or is the language more factual, with words used in their literal sense? Does the factual language underline the message?

Reflecting on grammar

- What features of grammar are noticeable and relevant in the text? Ask yourself questions such as the following:
  - Are the sentences short or long? Do they look similar or different?
  - Are there many adjectives (such as *yellow, beautiful, interesting, worrisome, disturbing*)? If so, what are the meaning of those adjectives?
  - Do the verb tenses refer to the past, present or future?
  - Are there many examples of the passive voice (*The President was criticized [by the judge]*) or are most sentences in the active voice (*The judge criticized the President*)?
  - Are there many modal auxiliaries (*can/could, may/might, shall/should, will/would, ought*)? If so, what do they mean?
- How do these grammatical features contribute to communicating the message?

Reflecting on interaction

- **Writer's perspective**: Is the writer visible in the text? That is, do they use the personal pronouns *I, we, me, us*? Do they express opinions? If so, what words do they use? (Look for words and phrases such as *I think, obviously, likely, in my opinion, according to*…)
- **Addressing the reader**: Is the reader addressed directly by means of the pronoun *you*? Is the reader included in the pronoun *we*? Are there questions to the reader? Are there directives to the reader, such as *Think about this for a moment; Don't worry; Remember to*…

Reflecting on text structure

- Does the text have paragraphs? If so, do the paragraphs have topic sentences?
- Are there explicit links between sentences and paragraphs, for example *however, furthermore, on the contrary*, or the less formal *and, but*?
- Is the text prose or poetry?
  - If not prose, look at line breaks, rhyme, stanzas, etc.

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

William Carlos Williams

Sample text: Why every teen should make reading the news a daily habit

The ability to engage with current events is not just a skill for adults – it's a cornerstone of becoming a well-rounded, informed citizen. Media literacy, paired with an understanding of world affairs, gives teenagers the tools they need to navigate today's increasingly complex society.

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. It's a critical skill for navigating the vast ocean of information teenagers encounter daily. Social media platforms, news websites, and streaming content flood users' feeds with opinions, stories, and sometimes misinformation. Without media literacy, distinguishing credible news from clickbait or propaganda becomes an overwhelming challenge.

When teenagers read the news regularly, they open themselves to diverse perspectives and develop the ability to question biases, verify facts, and think independently – invaluable skills not just in academics but also in everyday life.

Going hand in hand with media literacy is the battle against misinformation. After all, one of the greatest threats in the digital age is misinformation. False narratives spread quickly, especially on social media platforms where many teenagers get their news.

The importance of teenagers reading the news goes far beyond staying informed; it's about cultivating media literacy, fostering empathy, and preparing for the future. In a world where information shapes reality, staying connected to the news is a superpower that teenagers must harness. By encouraging them to read the news and teaching them how to evaluate it critically, we equip them to not only understand the world but also actively participate in shaping it.

By Yastika Chouhan, *The Teen Mag*, 8 January 2025, abridged.

Towards an analysis

Understanding the text type

- Type of text: opinion piece, originally from the *Teen Magazine*.
- Topic/message: the media habits and media literacy of teens.
- Target group: other teenagers
- Communicative purpose: explain why teenagers should read news on a daily basis.
- What words/wordings in the text most clearly express or underline the message and appeal to the target group?

Noticing the wordings

- Vocabulary referring to the media and world news.
- Words about the benefits of reading news, e.g. *ability, media literacy,* and *superpower*.
- Formal words/phrases, such as *a well-rounded, informed citizen*, *extend beyond their immediate experiences, cultivating media literacy, fostering empathy, harness*.
- Formal grammar: long noun phrases and long and complex sentences (last paragraph).
- Effect of formality: sense of authority.
- Contrastive pairs such as "*not just a skill … it's a cornerstone"* – argumentative technique.
- Teenagers addressed as *they/them*, not *we/us*. → the writer does not identify with the readers (?)

New setup as from 2027

Task 1 – “kortsvarsoppgave”

Task 1a (Attachemnt: two billboards with the same text but different images.)
Write **200–250** words.

Write a text where you:

- explain the main message of the billboards.
- explore how language and visual elements are used to convey the message.
- refer to examples from the billboards in your answer.



https://kandidat.udir.no/epsmateriell/eksempeloppgave?fagkode=SPR3029&malform=nb-NO

Analysing images (in a simple, non-specialist way)

(Paltridge 2021, Kress & van Leeuwen 2006)

1. What does the picture contain? Give details!
2. What is foregrounded and backgrounded? Is everything in focus?
3. If the picture shows a person (or animal) – is there eye-contact with the viewer, or does the person look up, down, or out of the picture?
4. Do we see the main element(s)in the image from above, below, or eye-height?
5. How are colours used? How do the colours set the atmosphere of the image?
6. For all the above points: what is the effect on the viewers? How does the image make them feel?
7. If both text and image: how do the two interact? Is the text or the image more important?

Inside information: Colin McShane, son of a firefighter who died in the 9/11 attacks but chose to follow in his father's footsteps.



Analysing the Mercury image

- Billboard in a public place with photo and short text in capitals.
- Freddy Mercury on stage (foreground) in a stadium full of people (background). Strong light behind FM. Large expanse of sky.
- No eye contact, FM is seen from the back and from below. Posture: dynamic. He looks toward the sky – we are looking the same way if viewing the billboard from the ground.
- The billboard image is black-and-white. Historical feel? (the larger picture has colour: contrast between FM and the preson watching?)
- The verbal message is short and simple, but some unexpected features: opposite of the usual capslock statements about immigrants. Do people think of FM as an immigrant or a star from the UK? The text harmonizes with the image.



Task: Write a text where you (i) explain the main message of the billboards, (ii) explore how language and visual elements are used to convey the message, (iii) refer to examples from the billboards in your answer.

Bonus track: Analysing an Instagram post by the group responsible for the Mercury billboard

everyonehateselon_

Freddie Mercury came to the UK as a kid because people that looked like him were being killed back home in Zanzibar.

In the UK, he formed Queen.

In the UK, he became a global icon.

But he didn't become British by getting famous. He became British by building a life here. Just as a factory worker, or a doctor, or anybody else does.

Billionaires want you to hate immigrants, so we don't blame them for our problems. We won't fall for it.

Our billboard was inspired by the art of @jeremydeller, and we created it with his blessing.

📍 Liverpool, where Queen first played together



Preparing to analyse the text

- What kind of text is it?
- (What topic/message does it have?)
- Where did it appear originally?
- Who is it aimed at? (target group)
- What is the purpose of the text?
- What words/wordings in the text most clearly express or underline the message and appeal to the target group?

everyonehateselon_

Freddie Mercury came to the UK as a kid because people that looked like him were being killed back home in Zanzibar.

In the UK, he formed Queen.

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But he didn't become British by getting famous. He became British by building a life here. Just as a factory worker, or a doctor, or anybody else does.

Billionaires want you to hate immigrants, so we don't blame them for our problems.
We won't fall for it.

Striking language use



- Repetition:
  - Freddy Mercury / he / him
  - The UK
  - British
  - "In the UK he…"; BECOME British by V-ing.
- Style: Neutral/informal *(as a kid, getting famous, don't, won't*). No difficult words.
- Sentences: mostly short; one incomplete *(Just as*…).
- Pronouns (last two paragraphs): *you – we – we* (inclusive 'we'). *Them* = the billionaires: distance.
- Causes and contrasts (explicit and non-explicit).
- Structure: most sentences are also paragraphs.

everyonehateselon_

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English 2: A step up?

“Old” wordings:

- Comment on what the message of the text is and briefly explain how this message is communicated. Use relevant terminology and refer to examples from the text in your answer. (2024)
- Comment on what the message of the text is and give examples of how this message is communicated. (2023)

New wording (sample task):

Write a text where you

- explain the main message of the song.
- examine how language and structure in the song are used to convey attitudes and feelings about Californication.
- refer to examples from the song in your answer.

Difference between old and new: the instructions look more specific.
Difference between English 1 and English 2: very little (?). Possibly a difference in the difficulty level of the text to comment on.

Assessment criteria task 1, English 1 & 2

Your answer will be assessed based on the following criteria:

- How well the task is addressed, including relevant use of information from the attachment
- Use of appropriate concepts and terminology
- Structure and text coherence
- Clear, accurate and appropriate language use

Sample exam task for English 2, fresh from Udir

Task 1a

Write **200–250** words.

Write a text where you

- explain the main message of the song.
- examine how language and structure in the song are used to convey attitudes and feelings about Californication.
- refer to examples from the song in your answer.

Californication

Psychic spies from China try to steal your mind's elation
And little girls from Sweden dream of silver screen quotation
And if you want these kind of dreams it's Californication

It's the edge of the world and all of Western civilization
The sun may rise in the East, at least it settled in a final location
It's understood that Hollywood sells Californication

Pay your surgeon very well to break the spell of aging
Celebrity skin, is this your chin, or is that war you're waging?

First born unicorn
Hardcore soft porn

Dream of Californication. [...]

(Red Hot Chili Peppers)

Outlining an answer:

- Main **message** (summed up in the glossary's explanation of 'Californication': "the spread of California's culture and beliefs, particularly Hollywood. Often used in a negative sense.") – how civilization is being destroyed at the edge of the world.

- Striking language features = literary features of poetry.
  - Rhyme, e.g. *elation, quotation, Californication*
  - Alliteration, e.g. /s/ in *psychic spies, steal, Sweden, silver screen*
  - Assonance, e.g. /aɪ/ in *psychic spies, China, try, mind*
- Less striking, but still noteworthy:
  - The language is pretty everyday in spite of the poetry format.
  - Contradictions: frontiers in a basement, tidal waves (couldn't) save the world
  - Many words refer to things that are artificial or imagined/fictitious. (*unicorn, fairy,*
- Contrasts:
  - *psychic spies from China* (line 1), *little girls from Sweden* (line 2)
  - East (beginnings, sunrise) vs. West (end, sunset)



What are language features and what are they doing in my text?

- They are pieces of language with a function in the context.
- Possible extension to communicative features, including structure and images.
- They represent choices made by the writer/speaker to communicate a message to the target group in an effective manner.
- They help the writer/speaker fulfil the purpose of the text.



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