

VATE 2013 English Language Sample Examination Paper
Section C – Essay: Question 8 – sample essay

NB: This sample commentary is a detailed analysis which highlights the range of language features which may be discussed. Student responses will reflect exam conditions and time limits.

Question 8: Our language choices can have a powerful impact on others. How do we construct our language to promote social harmony and build rapport with others? Refer to at least two subsystems of language in your response.

From an early age, we learn quickly how important our language is in its impact on other people. We learn how powerful language can be in provoking a reaction, both positive and negative, from those around us, and we also learn how to manipulate our words in order to achieve a desired goal, for example, acquiring a new toy, or gaining permission to go out with friends. Education is also a key component in developing this awareness. At home and at school, we are constantly reminded about the powerful impact our language choices can have on others, especially our peers, and we are taught how to appropriately speak to others to show respect, build friendships, and maintain harmony in our homes, schools, and other social groups. As it is in our personal lives, so too is it in the public sphere, for example, in the public language of the media, political debate, bureaucracy, law, and religion. While we in Australia defend the right to free speech, we also value the rights of all individuals to live free from discrimination and take pride in ourselves as a peace-loving nation.

In order to build and sustain friendships, or simply to just get along with other people in our day-to-day lives, we learn from experience and education to actively construct our language to avoid words or expressions which have the potential to hurt or offend people by drawing attention to and/or ridiculing them on the basis of their physical appearance, gender, religious affiliation, ethnic background, disability, sexuality, age, and socio-economic status. We quieten children who have a tendency to publicly state the obvious, “Look at that fat lady!” or ‘That man has a black face’ because these expressions make us feel socially uncomfortable. Most schools actively support an anti-bullying policy which sets the guidelines for acceptable behaviour and language in the school in order to maintain order but also promote a sense of safety and belonging. Students who exclude or taunt others by calling them names like, ‘Retard’, ‘Povo’, ‘Gay’ are reprimanded.

Similarly, here in Australia, we have at both state and federal level anti-discrimination legislation which clearly sets the parameters for appropriate ways of communicating with and about others. There have been several recent incidents involving high profile or public figures which reinforce how taboo discriminatory language is in Australia. Perth ‘shock jock’ Howard Sattler was condemned and ultimately sacked in June 2013 for an interview with the then Prime Minister Julie Gillard in which he questioned her partner’s sexuality. Liberal election candidate Kevin Baker was recently forced to resign after it became public that his website contained racist and sexist content. Public expressions of racist abuse, such as that which occurred on a suburban train in Melbourne this year, are generally not tolerated within the Australian community. While these incidents unfortunately still occur, they often provoke distress not only for those involved but also for the wider community,

undermining the potential for social cohesion by generating anger and a sense of insecurity in society.

If our goal is social harmony, then we often also need to avoid other forms of taboo language, such as swearing. While attitudes towards swearing, in general, have relaxed in recent times and we are more used to hearing these words and expressions freely used in the community and in the media, there are still social expectations and guidelines which dictate how acceptable and appropriate swear words are in a given context, especially when there are children involved. This is demonstrated by the fact that we have a classification system for television programs and movies screened in Australia which alerts viewers to profane language, amongst other things, and shows containing such language are usually screened later, at more 'adult' appropriate times. This attitude can also be seen in the security measures employed at the MCG. During a recent match, my family and others around us were unfortunately witness to an act of unprovoked aggression by one individual to another man which involved a lot of yelling and swearing, especially the use of the 'F-word'. We called the advertised MCG 'Antisocial Behaviour Number' and the offender was quickly ejected from the ground. Similarly, most of us understand how unacceptable swearing is in certain contexts and relationships, especially where a show of respect and deference is expected towards those in positions of authority, like our parents, teachers, employers, and other elders in our community. In *Summer Heights High*, Jonah's infamous 'puk you' to his teacher symbolises his anti-social behaviour which ultimately leads to his exclusion from the school community.

What is also important in this discussion, however, is the role of context in determining what sort of impact our language choices can have on others. In our personal lives, particularly with our peers and close friends, we may construct our language differently in order to build rapport with others in our various social and interest groups. We may use swearing and even discriminatory language to break down social distance with those with whom we wish to connect on a more personal basis. The use of such taboo language, together with particular slang or jargon, may in fact be an integral part of the register which bonds a group of friends together. It may show how comfortable friends are with each other that they are able to use this language and not be offended by it, but rather, accept or even embrace it as a sign of friendship and inclusion. A friend of mine often addresses me as 'Ranga' and 'Moll'; these are terms of endearment which reinforce our closeness and characterise the tenor of our friendship. Clearly, what is important here is a shared understanding between participants and acceptance of the intention behind the language choices. Recently, Tony Abbott created controversy by referring to the 'sex-appeal' of one of the female Liberal candidates. To many, this comment was seen as socially divisive and politically incorrect, reinforcing a patriarchal gender stereotype which measures a woman's worth only by her appearance and desirability. However, those who defended Abbott, including the candidate in question, argued that as his intention was not to be discriminatory then this could not be taken as an offensive remark.

How we use language to promote social harmony and build rapport with others relies on our awareness of the role of language in maintaining the positive and negative face needs of those we interact with everyday. We can construct our language to make others feel included, respected and liked – what choices we make depend on the context and participants. Sometimes this is achieved with a more formal register with

terms of address which respect a person's seniority or position of authority, for example, using 'Mr' and 'Mrs' with older people, or titles, such as 'Madam Speaker' in parliament. In other contexts, less formal modes of address are more effective in meeting positive face needs, for example, using the personal pronouns 'you' and 'we' rather than the impersonal 'one', and addressing a person with their preferred nickname. How we name others is crucial to their sense of belonging and self-worth. Using the term 'survivors' rather than 'victims' to describe individuals who experienced child sexual abuse shows respect to those who prefer this term which has, perhaps, more positive and hopeful connotations.

In recent times, there has been a shift towards using non-gendered terms, such as 'chairperson' and 'flight attendant', to promote a sense of inclusion within the community, particularly of women. This has even led to change in the language of traditional institutions like the Catholic Church. These features of inclusive language are important in both speaking and writing as are other linguistic choices which facilitate communication and therefore build rapport with others. These include the use of appropriate conventional openings and closings, like 'Good morning', 'How are you?', 'G'day', 'Take care', 'Have a good weekend', which set the tone, polite or friendly, and frame the interaction – without these the conversation can feel very abrupt. The use of other politeness markers is especially important in meeting negative face needs, the need to be autonomous and not feel imposed on. The apology 'Pardon Our Progress', which introduces the Metro Trains notice about service interruptions, validates the inconvenience that will be experienced by commuters but also puts a positive spin on the disruption by labelling it 'progress'. Similarly, the potential awkwardness in asking someone to put their dog back on a lead is downplayed by using praise, 'Great dog', and showing gratitude 'Thanks' and in the choice of the construction 'I would appreciate it if...' which softens the request. This contrasts with the commanding tone of the imperative, 'Put that dog on its lead', which imposes an action on the listener and has the potential to generate hostility, even aggression.

The use of euphemistic expressions are crucial in promoting social harmony by seeking to avoid the awkwardness, embarrassment or even offence often associated with traditionally taboo topics in society, like death, sex, disability, body odours and secretions, etc. Depending on the situational and cultural context, we may excuse ourselves to visit 'the littlest room' (toilet), or imply that someone 'bats for the other team' (homosexual), 'is not long for this world' (dying), or even 'under the weather' (intoxicated). Euphemisms can help us respect the dignity of others when negotiating tricky territory. For example, suggesting that 'your deodorant is letting you down' is a gentler, more impersonal way of conveying to someone that they may have a body odour problem. On the other hand, social cohesion and harmony also often rely on language choices which seek to clarify rather than gloss over or even obfuscate. This is essential when conveying important information to the community, such as the Australian Electoral Commission's official guide to the 2013 federal election which includes details about where, when, how and who to vote for on election day in order to maximise voter turnout. This is achieved through the use of plain and standard English which avoids colloquialisms, idiomatic expressions, technical jargon or lots of embedded phrases and which delivers a direct message through the use of the personal pronoun 'you' and imperative sentence types. These language choices are particularly important in successfully conveying this message to all members of the

Australian community, including those who struggle with literacy or those for whom English is not their first language.

In both our personal relationships and in the wider community, language plays a central role in helping us connect with those around us. Building positive friendships and a peaceful and harmonious society requires an awareness, from both individuals and organisations, of the powerful impact our various language choices can potentially have on others. Education and legislation are two important ways of supporting language which seeks to promote a sense of belonging and worth for all in contemporary Australian society.