

Common language errors

by B. Scheffler

On the whole, Senior Certificate candidates leave one with the impression that they are serious pupils who have studied as much as is humanly possible, and that their teachers are as serious as they in striving for quality.

It is therefore not surprising that candidates write an acceptable, even a competent, English. There is however a tendency towards flowery style, towards circumlocutions and redundancy. There is also a noticeable predilection for the longer word or the less frequently used word. Although these tendencies are in themselves innocent, the total effect is often negative, detracting from fluent, correct style. Teachers are therefore advised to warn their pupils against excessive use of the above.

The following errors also occur with such frequency that I wish to draw the attention of both teachers and pupils to them, in the hope of helping candidates to eliminate them from their work.

1. The use of redundancies mars style:

Examples: ... **can be able to** ...

... **the necessary things which we needed** ...

2. Misrelated participles are incorrect grammatically and confuse the meaning:

Example: Being a hot day I fell asleep.

(This sentence means: As I was a hot day=impossible=I fell asleep!)

Correct: As **it** was a hot day I fell asleep.

3. Incorrect use of tenses:

- (a) Candidates should keep to the same tense throughout the essay and should change tense only if this is imperative.

Example: If you are telling a story, it happened long ago. You therefore use the past tense throughout the narrative unless you have a very good reason for switching to the present tense, or, for that matter, to the future tense.

- (b) Candidates sometimes use the present perfect tense instead of the past indefinite:

Example: 'I **have ordered** books last month' instead of 'I **ordered** books last month'.

- (c) Candidates sometimes use the past continuous tense instead of the past indefinite:

Example: 'His father **was having** many cattle' instead of
'His father **had** many cattle'.

Candidates similarly confuse the present continuous and the present indefinite tenses.

Example: At the moment we **are not having** any material.
Correct: At the moment we **do not have** any material.

4. Unidiomatic, incorrect expressions:

- (a) As you know **that** I have no-one to turn to.
Correct: As you know, I have no-one to turn to.
- (b) I was **being** at a party.
Correct: I was attending a party.
- (c) You must please **apologise** me.
Correct: You must please forgive me.
- (d) **No more** instead of **no longer**:
I am **no more** interested in going to school.
Correct: I am **no longer** interested in going to school.
- (e) I am **very much** healthy.
Correct: I am **quite** healthy.
- (f) Please **pass** my regards ...
Correct: Please **give** my regards ...
- (g) To give a good advice.
Correct: To give good advice.
- (h) I wanted his **advices**.
Correct: I wanted his **advice**.
- (i) He was an important **somebody**.
He was an important **person**.
- (j) Please **borrow** me the money.
Correct: Please **lend** me the money.

5. Misspelt words:

Examples: modern, cheeks, sincerely.

One often finds the meaning of a sentence confused as a result of incorrect spelling.

6. Clichés:

Many candidates obviously spent considerable time studying proverbs and idioms – and use them indiscriminately.

Examples: Since my father is also dead, we are birds of a feather, but I am cock sure that you will feel less sad soon for every cloud has a silver lining.
For the sake of being in a nutshell, I want to apologise.

7. Some candidates tend to use words that they clearly do not know.

Example: A constable took the statement from the **deceased** wife.

(The candidate probably wanted to say that the constable took a statement from the wife of the deceased).

Simple, correct statements are awarded higher marks than incorrect attempts which have been the result of showing off.

8. Incorrect word order often confuses meaning. Word order should therefore receive careful attention.

Example: On his arrival the boy stabbed one of the fattest chief's bulls.

Surely: ... one of the chief's fattest bulls!

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