

# The Challenges of Languages

A new competition aims to stretch the brains of language students of all ages – including those at prep schools. Professor Richard Hudson, Chair of the Linguistics Olympiad, outlines the details.

ONE OF THE AIMS of every school is to stretch every child mentally, and the ultimate brain-stretching tool is a national competition such as the Mathematical Olympiad which provides extra motivation. Another aim of most independent schools is to promote foreign languages, a task made harder by the lack of real intellectual challenge

in the GCSE syllabus. But there is now a new feature in the UK educational landscape which brings extreme challenge into the study of languages: the UK Linguistics Olympiad.

Like any other academic olympiad, a linguistics olympiad is a competition for school children in which they work against time, and under exam conditions, to solve clearly defined problems where answers can be marked as either right or wrong. In a linguistics olympiad the data all involve language. Here's an easy example

from the language of a small Pacific island, Abma:

1. Mwamni sileng. *He drinks water.*
2. Nutsu mwatbo mwamni sileng. *The child keeps drinking water.*
3. Nutsu mwegau. *The child grows.*
4. Nutsu mwatbo mwegalgal. *The child keeps crawling.*
5. Mworob mwabma. *He runs here.*
6. Mwerava Mabontare mwisib. *He pulls Mabontare down.*
7. Mabontare mwisib. *Mabontare goes down.*
8. Mweselkani tela mwesak. *He carries the axe up.*
9. Mwelehte sileng mwabma. *He brings water.*
10. Mabontare mworob mwesak. *Mabontare runs up.*
11. Sileng mworob. *The water runs.*

Using these examples, competitors then translate some other sentences from English to Abma and vice versa. The challenge isn't simply a matter of working out word-for-word equivalents, though that in itself requires quite long chains of deduction. The data and questions are carefully chosen so that competitors have to get inside the grammar of the language. For instance, how do you say 'He went up' in Abma? In order to answer this



question, competitors have to work out not only that ‘He’ isn’t translated at all (see example 1), but that ‘went up’ is a single word (see ‘goes down’ in example 7). Given these two facts about Abma, the answer is clear: ‘He went up’ is translated by the one word *Mwesak*. The Abma problem is relatively easy; at the other end of the scale they are much, much harder.

One school’s experience provides a useful example. In 2010, Anouck Brenot joined Worth School as Head of French. At her previous school she had entered a few pupils for the UK Linguistics Olympiad, and so tentatively thought of entering about 20 pupils; the enthusiasm was so high, she eventually entered 79 pupils for the 2011 Olympiad: 66 from years 7 to 11 at Foundation level – the level for which the Abma problem was designed – and 13 at Advanced level. All 28 Year 7 pupils worked in teams whereas the older pupils worked individually.

And the outcome? The most important outcome was that the pupils enjoyed the challenge, and were very keen to know their results. However, five of the Advanced candidates also won national awards: three bronze, one silver and one gold. Better still, the gold winner, Piotr Galuszka, was selected for Round 2, a residential weekend at Edinburgh University. And even better, he performed so well in Round 2 that he was chosen as one of the four members of the team which will represent the UK at the International Linguistics Olympiad, which this year is in the USA.

Piotr commented: ‘I was very happy, even more so since I have known about subject olympiads for a long time and I have met people in Poland [where he was brought up] who participated and some were successful. They inspired me, and at the same time, it felt like it was inaccessible. The UKLO was somehow the last opportunity to be part of this and I never imagined I would win, even less in Linguistics.’ Not surprisingly, the school is delighted by Piotr’s success. Ms Brenot promises that the Olympiad is now in the school calendar ‘for ever’, and expects all this year’s competitors who are still in the school to enter again next year. She says, ‘I’ve never been so proud of Worth and the pupils as on that Wednesday as they were all head down – I almost felt emotional. I was on a high after that for two days’ – and that

was before she heard Piotr’s results.

Teenagers enjoy olympiad work, but is it good for them? How does it mesh with the various goals that schools have? Education is all about training minds, and traditionally the great mind-training subjects were the classics. The linguistics olympiad claims to reach much the same parts of the mind as the classics did (and still do in some schools). Olympiad work requires and develops some very important mental characteristics. Most obviously, it requires skill in formal analysis. Olympiad problems are an exercise in analytical thinking, very similar to the thinking required for mathematics.

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But olympiads are not just about cold mathematical reasoning. Faced by an apparently insoluble problem, a competitor needs many other mental qualities. One is persistence, the dogged determination that goes on trying when others are giving up. But persistence has to be combined with the ability to see alternatives to the current dead end – lateral thinking, creativity, thinking outside the box, call it what you want. At higher levels of difficulty, the answers are never obvious and crucial clues are often buried innocently in the instructions. It’s real detective work, just like in the movies, and that’s one of the attractions for teenagers.

In short, olympiad problems need analytical thinking, creativity, persistence, attention to detail and global thinking. But perhaps the most important mental quality for the olympiads is confidence. If you’re competing in the olympiad, you need to believe in yourself. The problems come with a guarantee of solubility, so you can be sure that there is a solution, if only you can find it. Whether or not you succeed depends on your mind-set at the start. If you assume you’re only

capable of solving easy problems, then after staring at the data for two minutes and finding no easy solution, you give up. But if you believe in yourself, you know that hard problems will be hard, but (probably) soluble given enough effort. Some competitors panic and guess blindly; others just walk out of the room in despair. None need give up, because a breakthrough, minor or major, may well be just round the corner. This is why we are pleased that younger competitors work in groups, as a way of building confidence.

The UK Linguistics Olympiad is organised in two rounds. Round 1, in early February, is held in schools, under exam conditions, using test material circulated by email a few days earlier. As mentioned earlier, it can be taken at different levels of difficulty, and as from 2012 there will be three levels: Foundation (very easy, suitable for Years 7 and 8, and possibly even for Year 6), Intermediate (for Years 9-11) and Advanced (for Years 12 and 13). These years are simply guidelines, and in fact any pupil may be entered at any level, regardless of age. The papers are all selected from a common pool of questions, with questions 1-5 for Foundation level, 3-7 for Intermediate and 5-9 for Advanced; this gives every pupil a taste of the next level up, as an inducement to re-enter the next year.

Only entries at Advanced level qualify for Round 2, so Foundation and Intermediate papers are marked within the school, and indeed pupils may work in teams if they prefer. Advanced level papers are marked centrally and the marks select not only the sixteen who go through to Round 2, but also about a third of the candidates who qualify for gold, silver or bronze award certificates. Every candidate at Advanced level receives a certificate (including these award certificates) which is printed centrally, and schools can print their own for candidates at lower levels. Round 2 is a residential weekend in a university where all the winners are given tuition and the four members of the UK’s team at the International Linguistics Olympiad are selected. Our teams have performed very creditably since we sent our first team in 2009, but we could still do better.

Although we (at UKLO) are impressed by the Round 2 winners, and are proud of the teams we send abroad, our main concern is with Round 1. After all, that’s where we reach most children

– 600 in 2010 (our first year), 1200 in 2011. Since Round 1 is held in schools, we make it as school-friendly as we can; for instance, we leave schools to timetable the competition to suit their other commitments within a week in early February, and we provide a detailed marking scheme for schools to mark their own Foundation and Intermediate scripts. Above all, the competition is entirely free at all levels, so we depend heavily on sponsors.

One of the things we're especially proud of is the roughly equal balance between boys and girls in Round 1; so we boast that the Linguistics Olympiad brings girls into science and boys into languages. Girls enjoy thinking analytically, and boys enjoy applying this kind of thinking to language. We already have strong support among independent senior schools, which tend to punch above their weight; and we would welcome participation by prep schools, for whom Foundation questions would certainly be suitable.

*Professor Richard Hudson is Chair of the UK Linguistics Olympiad and Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at University College London.*

## How prep school pupils can get involved

*Attain asked Gillian Forte, the Modern Foreign Languages Subject Leader for IAPS, whether more prep schools should enter the next Olympiad:*

'I finished Richard Hudson's article about the Linguistic Olympiad in a state of excitement. Throughout this last academic year my prep school, (St Christopher's in Hove) has been working on a new language programme. We have called it Language Acquisition. Our aim is to enrich linguistically the lives of our pupils during their time with us, but also to send them onwards equipped for life in a multi-lingual world. We have realised that our pupils need to have de-coding skills in order to face the task of learning any language with confidence.'

'The Linguistic Olympiad provides the chance to practise in a way that is meaningful. There is no minimum age for children to take part and next year an easier Foundation level will be introduced specifically to encourage younger competitors. What better than short bites of an unknown language to decode – all the time with the certainty that a solution is possible? We, at St Christopher's, will certainly be entering this competition and I urge IAPS schools to do the same. Do let me know how your pupils react.'

*Gillian Forte is the MFL Subject Leader for IAPS  
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*For more information, please visit [www.uklo.org](http://www.uklo.org). You'll find plenty of examples of test material like the Abma problem and full details about how your school can join the others already registered for 2012.*