Getting your Language Muscles in Shape

The UK Linguistics Olympiad

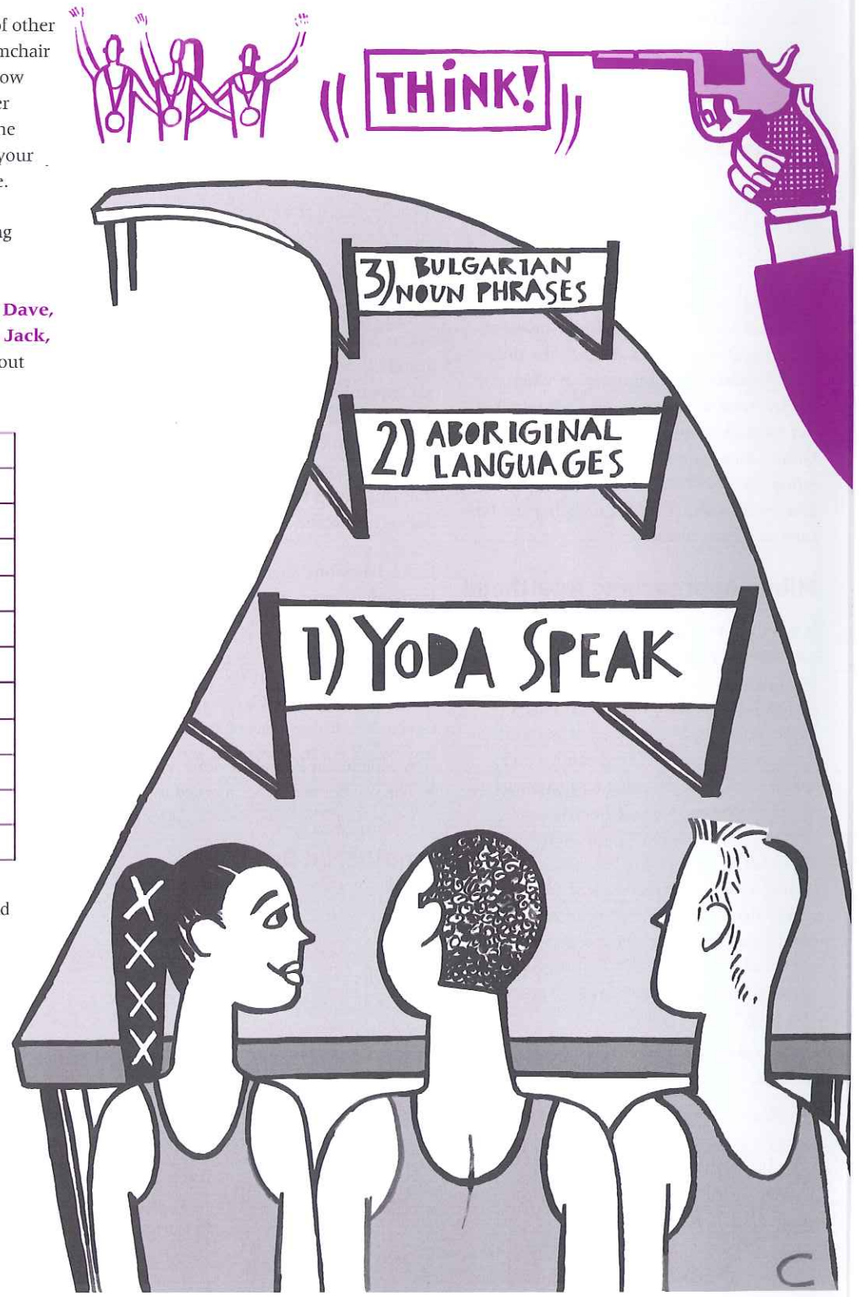
Teacher and Olympiad Committee member Ian Cushing, explains what it is and why you should consider taking part.

Are you interested in exotic glimpses of other cultures? Do you see yourself as an armchair Indiana Jones? Are you intrigued by how different languages work? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then the Linguistics Olympiad may be right up your street. Let me explain with an example.

Here are some words in a braille writing system called New York Point. They represent (in no particular order) the following names: **Ashley, Barb, Carl, Dave, Elena, Fred, Gerald, Heather, Ivan, Jack, Kathy, and Lisa**. Your job is to work out which one is which.

a.	
b.	
c.	
d.	
e.	
f.	
g.	
h.	
i.	
j.	
k.	
l.	

Spoiler alert! Before reading on, try and have a go for yourself…



How did you do? Hopefully you will have been able to make a start, but don't worry if you were completely bamboozled: linguistics puzzles get easier when you start to learn some useful strategies. Let's talk through one way to begin to solve the problem.

A handy starting-point is looking for common patterns in the data you are given. Now, five of the English names have the character <a> in second position. The braille in a, d, e, j and l have the same two-dot symbol (⠒) in the second position too, so we can guess that the character <a> = ⠒. Although that's a good start, it still doesn't allow us to match up any individual names. However, just learning one letter opens up a whole world of ways to solve the puzzle.

- Notice that d and j have the same braille symbol after the <a>, which must represent the <r> in Barb and Karl, as they are the only two names which have the same character after the <a>. But which is which? We might expect the <b> symbol to be the same, which would give us the answer, but braille, just like any other written language, needs to differentiate between upper and lower case. Maybe you can guess, perhaps looking at the upper and lower case symbol for <b> in the braille?
- Notice that two names, Elena and Lisa both end in <a> so must be either b. or g. Counting the number of letters and braille symbols in each pair might now be a good idea…

So after taking these initial steps, you should be able to do a couple of things: (1) begin to build a braille alphabet, (2) understand some ways in which the braille system works (capital letter marking, for example). And this is how linguistics puzzles work!

But don't relax just yet: as with any mystery, finding out new things results in new problems to solve. Can you, for instance, work out the special way in which digraphs (two letters that make one sound, such as <th>, <sh> or <ng>) are represented in braille? Would you be able to write words in braille yourself? Have a go at writing your own name, and if you need some symbols that are not present in the original data, would you be able to take a good guess at what they might be?

A typical puzzle from the Linguistics Olympiad would ask you to do just that – and the chances are that the puzzle would involve a language you have never heard of before. It might be an endangered language with only a few hundred speakers. It might be a language that is no longer used. Or it might even be a language that has been artificially created, for a film or TV show. In previous years, UKLO puzzles have drawn on languages such as Turkish, Welsh, Dutch, Bengali, Esperanto, Maori and Indonesian, to name a few.

The fact is that every year thousands of school students complete these kinds of language puzzles in a competition that tests their logical and problem-solving skills. In 2014, over 2,000 school and college students from across the UK entered. And another fact is that it's extremely easy for you to have a go yourself.

How it works

- Try having a go at some of the sample puzzles on the UKLO website (**http://www.uklo.org/example-questions**).
- Speak to your teacher about setting up a 'linguistics club' in which you can try some of the puzzles in groups.
- Try a range of different puzzles: they are ranked on their difficulty, ranging from 'breakthrough' to 'advanced'. Start with some easy ones and see how you get on. The solutions and in many cases an explanation are also on the website. Incidentally, the braille puzzle above is an extract from an advanced level question.
- Your teacher will need to register your school or college if you want to take part in the actual competition (which runs in February of every year). Round 1 will take place in your classroom.
- Those entering at the lower levels can work as individuals or in groups. Advanced level entries are solo competitors only.
- This year, we're introducing a new 'light' version of the competition, which can be completed in a single lesson.
- The puzzles are either marked by your teacher (at the lower levels) or by trained markers from UKLO (advanced level).
- The overall national winners will then go through to round 2.
- The highest scoring competitors from round 2 will then get the chance to represent Great Britain at the International Linguistics Olympiad!

Key dates for 2015

- January: deadline for Advanced level entries.
- February 2-6: round 1 competition, in schools and colleges.
- March 20-22: round 2 competition, at Oxford University

Of course, as well as being fun (or as one student put it: 'it mashes yer head, but in a good way'), it also has huge benefits for the language analysis you do in English Language. UKLO puzzles require a keen eye, the ability to spot patterns and a knack for inferring new things from unseen data – all of which are required at A Level English Language. And don't worry if you don't speak another language – that is certainly not a pre-requisite for enjoying and succeeding in the puzzles. Oh, and did we mention it's completely free to both schools and students?

Languages code the same message in very different weird and wonderful ways, and solving linguistics puzzles gives you some insight into how this is done. Try it for yourself, and we think you'll be hooked.

For more information explore the UKLO website here: **http://www.uklo.org/**

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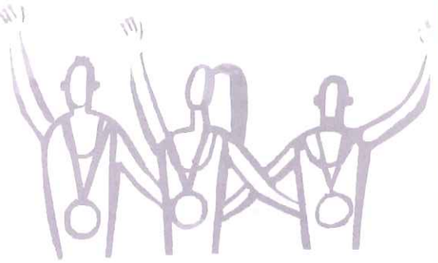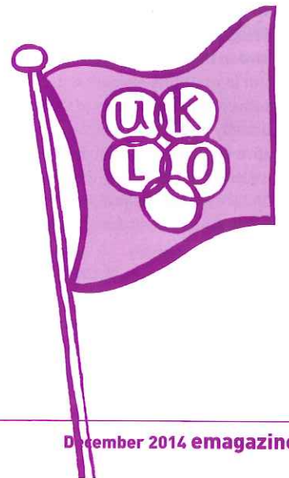
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- Michael Rosen: Cohesion in Texts *emagazine* 29, September 2006