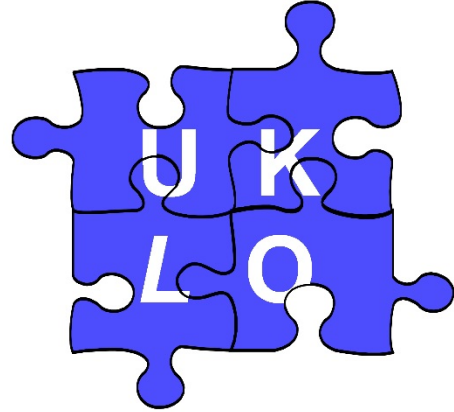


The Linguistics Olympiad

(Editor's note: Although she does not say so in her article, the writer received a gold certificate of achievement, for gaining a score in the 'Advanced' competition, which placed her 54th in the country; an extraordinary achievement, especially for a pupil in Year 11.)

Linguistics is the study of all aspects of language, including grammar, syntax, phonetics and semantics. The Linguistics Olympiad is very similar to the various Mathematics and Science challenges taken by members of both the Lower and Upper School. Much like these, it is not a test of factual knowledge, but of logic, so knowledge of any particular language is not required. There are three levels to the UKLO, foundation, intermediate and advanced, each paper open to students of any age, although the advanced level paper is the only one officially examined with bronze, silver and gold certificates awarded. There are around five questions in each paper, and each one provides all the information needed to solve the problem.

For most of the questions, the student must closely examine words and phrases of a particular language, aiming to gain from them an understanding of the grammatical rules and then use them to translate and construct more phrases. It is a test of the ability to spot patterns, define rules, and then apply them.



Languages included in the past have varied from Japanese, to 'Yodaspeak', to completely fictitious languages the exam-writers have created themselves. There are almost 7,000 languages spoken in the world today and many more which have been spoken in the past, and any one of them could feature in the paper. There could be a problem involving Waanyi, an Australian language surviving mainly in decades-old recordings, or one on the particularities of English syntax. I would recommend this Olympiad to anyone who wishes to test or improve their problem-solving, basic logic and deduction skills. It may appeal to students interested in computers and coding, as many of the problems involve code-breaking logic. Additionally it requires many skills transferable to Science. I would urge other students to give the competition a go next year: it is one of the few tests which you will leave feeling that you know more than when you went in, even if it is only a sporadic understanding of Dutch past participles. Past papers, example problems and more information can be found at www.uklo.org. Alternatively, go along to the weekly lunchtime Linguistics Club.