

EAE 0422 A	Sujet Jury	Sujet Candidat	Code Sujet	CLG 9
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Your main commentary should be focused on -ING forms. Other topics may also be addressed.

5 The tall, bespectacled, grey-haired man standing at the edge of the throng in the main room of the gallery, stooping very close to the young woman in the red silk blouse, his head lowered and angled away from her face, nodding sagely and emitting a phatic murmur from time to time, is not as you might think an off-duty priest whom she has persuaded to hear her confession in the midst of the party, or a psychiatrist conned into giving her a free consultation; nor has he adopted this posture the better to look down the front of her blouse, though this is an accidental bonus of his situation, the only one in fact.

10 The reason for his stance is that the room is full of noise, a conversational hubbub which bounces off the hard surfaces of the ceiling, walls and floor, and swirls around the heads of the guests, causing them to shout even louder to make themselves heard. This is known to linguists as the Lombard Reflex, named after Etienne

15 Lombard, who established early in the twentieth century that speakers increase their vocal effort in the presence of noise in the environment in order to resist degradation of the intelligibility of their messages. When many speakers display this reflex simultaneously they become, of course, their own environmental noise source, adding incrementally

20 to intensity. For the man now almost nuzzling the bosom of the woman in the red blouse, as he brings his right ear closer to her mouth, the noise reached some time ago a level that makes it impossible for him to hear more than the odd word or phrase of those she addresses to him. 'Side' seems to be one recurring word –or is it 'cider'? And 'flight from hell' – or was it 'cry for help'? He is, you see, 'hard of hearing' or 'hearing impaired' or, not to put too fine a point on it, deaf –not profoundly deaf, but deaf enough to make communication

25 imperfect in most social situations and impossible in some, such as this one.

30 He wears a hearing aid, an expensive digital device, with little beige plastic earpieces that fit snugly in both ears like baby snails in their shells, which has a program for damping down background noise, but at the cost of also damping down foreground sounds, and at a certain level of decibels the former completely overwhelms the latter, which is

35 now the case. It is not helpful that the woman seems to be an exception to the rule of the Lombard Reflex. Instead of raising the pitch and volume of her voice like everybody else in the room she maintains a level of utterance suitable for conversation in a quiet drawing room or a tête-à-tête in a sparsely peopled tea-shop. They

40 have been talking, or rather *she* has been talking, for some ten minutes now, and strive as he may he cannot identify the conversational topic. Is it the art on the walls –blown-up coloured photographs of urban wasteland and rubbish tips? He thinks not, she does not glance or point at them, and the intonation of her speech,

45 which he can just about register, does not have the characteristic declarative pattern of art-speak, or art-bollocks as he sometimes disrespectfully calls it to tease his wife. It has rather the tone of something personal, anecdotal and confidential. He glances at the woman's face to see if it gives a clue. She fixes him earnestly with her

50 blue eyes, and pauses in her utterance as if expecting a response. 'I see', he says, adjusting his countenance to express both thoughtful reflection and sympathy, hoping that one or the other will seem appropriate, or at least not grotesquely inappropriate, to whatever she has been saying. It seems to satisfy her anyway, and she begins

55 speaking again. He doesn't resume his former posture: there really is no point in aiming his right earpiece to receive her speech when the party babble is pouring into the left one, and if he should try to cover his left ear with his hand it would only produce a feedback howl from his hearing aid as well as an eccentric-looking posture. What to do

60 now? What to say when she pauses again? It is far too late to confess, 'Look, sorry, I haven't heard a word you've said to me for the last ten minutes (a quarter of an hour it might be now). I'm deaf, you see, can't hear a thing in this din.' She would reasonably wonder why he hadn't said so before, why he let her go on talking, nodding and

65 murmuring as if he understood her.