

GRAMMAR

by Scott Thornbury

Things we need to know,
things we thought we knew,
things we tend to forget and
things to think about.

What?

Grammar describes the way language is organised and patterned – particularly at the level of the sentence – in order to make meaning. In a recent book, Dave Willis has identified at least three ‘levels’ at which grammar operates: the level of the ordering of elements in a sentence, such as the fact that the subject precedes the verb, and the object follows it, as in *man – bite – dog* (what Willis terms the ‘grammar of structure’). Then there is the level at which these elements are made to relate to one another in order to fine-tune meaning, eg *The man was bitten by the dog* (the ‘grammar of orientation’). And, finally, there is ‘pattern grammar’ – the way that specific words, often with similar meanings, have associated patterns. Thus, *by* is frequently found after past participles (*bitten by ...*, *written by ...*, *directed by ...*) as a way of indicating the agent of the action. And *by* is often followed by nouns like *car*, *bus*, *train* and *mule*, to say how someone or something is transported. It can also be followed by an *-ing* form, and it forms the first element in set phrases such as *by the way*, *by and large*, and so on. This last point demonstrates the way grammar, especially pattern grammar, slides into lexis, so that there is a fuzzy area between what we could call ‘small grammar’ and ‘big words’ (see my article in ETp Issue 31).

Why?

It’s true that you can get a lot of communicative mileage out of stringing words together, as in *Man bite dog*. However, most learners are keen to graduate from this somewhat telegraphic way of speaking, especially when misunderstandings result, as might be the case had they meant to say *The man was bitten by the dog*. This is where grammar, at all its levels, comes into play. Grammar is a way of reducing ambiguity (although it doesn’t reduce it completely – witness the much-quoted *I don’t like visiting aunts*).

Grammar also has a social function: the particular grammar you adopt, like the

particular accent, distinguishes you as part of a social group (or discourse community). This is why so much ink is expended on issues like *fewer vs. less* (as in *There were fewer/less people here than last time*), and pronouns, as in *He is taller than I/me*. Here there is no question of ambiguity, but simply one of group membership: are you in or out? For learners who aspire to be members of an educated, native-speaker-like discourse community, then third person *-s*, and the standard use of the present perfect, will be important. For those who don’t, they won’t.

Finally, grammar has a psychometric function: that is to say, it is used as a measure of language proficiency, much more commonly than, say, fluency, or vocabulary knowledge. For learners who want to pass exams, grammar will be a priority.

Why not?

‘All grammar and no play makes Jack a dull boy.’ It also makes Jill a fairly dull teacher. Doing grammar, at the expense of opportunities to use language for original, creative and meaningful interaction, is time largely misspent. And if grammar teaching eats into the time available for vocabulary activities, ditto. What’s more, a lot of items on the traditional grammar syllabus are ‘icing on the cake’ in terms of their communicative pay-off. They date from a time when language learning was thought to be primarily the accumulation of a wide variety of sentence structures. Verb forms like the present perfect continuous, or the future passive, or the third conditional, are very rare in actual language use, especially compared to present and past simple. Time spent learning and testing these obscure ‘grammar macnuggets’ might be better spent learning some of the more common patterns of English, especially those associated with its most common words, like *by*, *for* and *way*.

How?

In his book, Willis reminds us that some grammar, particularly ‘grammar of orientation’, including the tense and

modality systems and the use of articles, is virtually impossible to learn simply through the study and application of rules. There are no rules for the present perfect, for example, that have ‘psychological reality’ for learners. You just get the feel of it through continual exposure and use. Likewise, ‘pattern grammar’, because there are so many possible word combinations, is probably best picked up through exploring texts. The ‘grammar of structure’, on the other hand, is relatively easily taught, and one way of doing this is to have learners abstract rules from examples.

Probably the three most effective ways, then, of developing grammar awareness are:

- 1 rule discovery through examples
- 2 error correction
- 3 text analysis

Let’s have a look at each of these in turn.

1 Rule discovery (grammar of structure)

Dictate or write up some sentences that include a structural feature you want to draw attention to, eg frequency adverbs. Tell the class that, first of all, they have to decide if these sentences are true or false:

- 1 *In Spain people often eat late.*
- 2 *In Greece people typically start work at eight.*
- 3 *In Portugal children have always gone to bed by ten.*
- 4 *In Britain people never have siestas.*
- 5 *The French usually have breakfast in a bar or café.*
- 6 *In Italy Sundays are generally spent with the family.*

Having argued over the truth of these sentences, students are then asked to underline the adverbs of frequency in each sentence, and to identify its position in relation to the verb. They will notice that the adverb precedes the verb, but follows the verb to *be* or the auxiliary. Establish the rule, and then dictate some adverb-less sentences, such as *In Germany people have siestas*, which students have to complete by inserting the appropriate frequency adverb in the correct place, before discussing in open class.

2 Error correction (grammar of orientation)

Reactive teaching is generally more effective than proactive teaching. That is, by responding to the errors that learners make in their attempts to communicate, you are more likely to match each learner's individual developmental trajectory than by trying to pre-empt error through pre-teaching. For example, set a simple pairwork communication task, such as: *'Write a paragraph about your partner's last weekend. Ask each other as many questions as possible in five minutes, and then spend five minutes writing.'* Collect the texts. In advance of the next lesson and with regard to, say, tense and aspect, select 15 to 20 sentences from these texts, some of which are well-formed, some of which are not. Copy these onto the board or a transparency, and ask learners, working in pairs or small groups, to select the well-formed sentences and correct the others. In open class discuss their results, and draw attention to any general rules. Hand back the texts that each individual wrote, and ask them to correct them.

3 Text analysis (pattern grammar)

Learners first read a text (such as the one in the box above right) in order to understand it in depth. This may mean allowing dictionary use and peer consultation. Understanding can be checked, initially, by getting them to re-tell the story in the order that it actually happened.

When you are satisfied that all students have a good grasp of what the text is about, set them the following 'grammar sleuthing' questions. Allow learners to consult grammar reference books. (You could set different questions to different groups so that later they can 'teach' each other.)

- 1 Find and classify all the examples in the text (including the title) of:
 - *have/had/has*
 - *-ing* words
 - past participles
 - *to*
- 2 Find noun phrases that are formed from:
 - noun + noun
 - adjective + noun
 - noun + *of* + noun
 - noun + 's + noun

Police dog sacked after biting innocent man

A police dog in Basel, Switzerland, has got the sack for biting an innocent bystander at the scene of a burglary.

Shep, a six-year-old German shepherd, was taken off duty after the incident.

The man had to be taken to hospital in an ambulance for treatment to a leg injury.

Shep's handler, who had been called to a burglary at a city boutique, was told the suspect was still in the building.


But as officers carried out a search, the dog wandered outside to where a group of people were watching events. He then allegedly bit a 20-year-old man.

Shep was one of eight dogs serving with Basel police. A spokesman said this was the first such incident to have occurred in the city.

- 3 Underline all the prepositional phrases (ie preposition + noun phrase). Make three lists: place, time, other. Then put the prepositional phrases into the appropriate category. (For the purposes of this exercise, ignore *of* + noun phrase.)
- 4 How many 'zero articles' can you find? Can you explain the lack of an article in each case?

After they have completed and checked these questions, ask the students to work together in pairs or small groups to reconstruct the text from memory. You may need to provide some prompts to help them do this, eg the first two words of each sentence.

And finally ...

Remember that it is unlikely that any of the grammar you teach will take hold if there are not frequent opportunities for putting it to practical use. This does not mean simply doing exercises. It means using language creatively in interaction. 

Willis, *D Rules, patterns, and words*
CUP 2003



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