

## On learning a language: what is grammar ?

Grammar is much sexier than it first appears. The Scots were quick to realise this, for they used 'grammar' to describe the magical quality of words, and pronounced it a wee bit differently from those of us south of the border. Before long English had a new word, 'glamour'.

'Glamour' may have moved on to the world of celebrities and supermodels, but the magic of grammar remains, even if it isn't always obvious. Many are frightened off by talk of split infinitives and hanging participles, by red ink scrawled over exercise books, by examinations and a fear of failure. This was all too negative for the 1960s, when grammar stopped being taught as a matter of routine. In the circles where it did survive, grammar was wrapped up in an academic jargon that suffocated the flickering embers of interest. Many teachers thereafter simply ignored it, for that was the precedent. Some hadn't been taught it in the first place.

The downgrading was partly because grammar is not essential to the development of our own mother-tongue: the infant who desires a slurp of milk soon discovers which noise will get him some. As grunts turn into words, we add to and refine our knowledge and develop a feel for the patterns of the language and build our own grammar as we go along. It is only when we want to be analytical and think about what we think, what we write, and what we say, that grammar begins to matter.

Grammar has an inevitable part to play in the study of other languages. You can learn a foreign language by going to the country and just getting on with it; but you may find the months if not years needed for that impracticable. A language course is the next best solution, and the language's grammar will offer the short-cut to rapid learning. Grammar is hugely creative; it is not a manual of what you should say so much as what you *can* say. For instance, if we can use the future tense of one verb, e.g 'he will see you', we can apply the formula to other expressions to create the future of every other English verb ('he will visit...', 'he will leave...' etc.). The grammar identifies the patterns of a language, which will quickly multiply what we can say.

Grammar is the subject or science which deals with words, how they are formed, their shape, their bearing on each other. There are broadly two theories about the best use of grammar: one is 'prescriptive', the other 'descriptive'. Prescriptive grammar is the rules of engagement, what we should or shouldn't say or write, while descriptive grammar is a study of how the language is used, noting regular and other uses without seeking to determine what is correct. One is an instruction manual, the other a plain record. Any worthwhile study of language should harness both approaches, for they temper each other: any living language will continue to evolve, so we cannot have too fixed a set of rules; equally, an approach which tries to do without rules and guidelines will only accelerate the decline of language as an instrument of communication.

The essential building blocks are *nouns*. When we speak or think or write, we have to have something in mind. Take 'food' for instance. It might be fast food, hot food or delicious food, but the thing is the food. The other words (*adjectives*) tell us more about it, but by themselves they are nothing; 'fast', 'hot' and 'delicious' are

meaningless in a vacuum. They have to refer to something, a fast runner, perhaps, or delicious dinner. When we say ‘hot today, isn't it?’, the thing, though not stated, is obviously the weather, unless you're eating chilli or a curry.

There are lots of things that can happen to food. You can buy it, cook it, chew it, swallow it, wolf it down, spit it out, give it away, lose it or put it in the fridge. These words which state the action are called *verbs*. Verbs have different ‘tenses’ to make clear the timing, i.e. past tenses for actions in the past, the present tense for current ones, and the future for what is still to happen (‘I will...’, ‘I am...’, ‘I have ...’, etc).

No language is free from irregularity and inconsistency. Consider the two English expressions 'like to chat' and 'like chatting'. They are very similar in meaning. But 'stop chatting' and 'stop to chat' are quite different. Exceptions like this do not devalue the patterns: it is only odd because you have an idea of the regular pattern in the first place. I hoped you stopped to read this. Now you can stop reading it.

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