

# **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY GRAMMAR?**

A commentary on an accompanying Ppt. presentation

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## **Slide 1**

### **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY GRAMMAR?**

The word *grammar* seems to be fairly straightforward. We feel happy enough that we know what we mean by it. We use it all the time and people seem to know what we are talking about.

But I am going to suggest in this presentation that *grammar* is a very dangerous word. It can lead to serious misunderstandings and it can help to reinforce classroom practice which frustrate learners' development.

## **Slide 2**

- 1. My students know the grammar but they can't use it.**
- 2. By the age of five children know most of the grammar of their mother tongue.**
- 3. You can't speak a language unless you know the grammar.**

### 1. "My students know the grammar but they can't use it"

When teachers say this what they often mean is "My students know the rules for forming *do*-questions, for example, but they don't actually produce *do*-questions. They always say things like *What your name?* or *Where you live?* or *What mean 'rules'?*"

### 2. "By the age of six children know most of the grammar of their mother tongue"

Our grandson, Sam, is six years old. Not surprisingly he speaks English without any difficulty. He can use all the tenses and is constantly asking questions, and so on. He even uses modals with *have*. So clearly Sam knows the grammar of English because he is able to operate it without any trouble at all.

But of course there is a sense in which he doesn't know the grammar at all. If you were to ask him "Sam, what are the rules for forming *do*-questions?" he would probably say 'What's a *do*-question?'

The phrase *know the grammar* is being used in two quite different ways here. In 1 it means being able to cite the rules for forming acceptable sentences. But in 2 it means knowing the system in a way that enables you to produce acceptable forms of the

language. In 1 it means knowing *about* the language, whereas in 2 it means being able to use the language.

So what do teachers mean when they say, as some of them often do:

3 “You can’t speak a language unless you know the grammar.”

If they mean this in sense 2, then they are saying *You can’t speak a language unless you can produce acceptable sentences* or *You can’t speak a language unless you can use the language*. And these are not very useful things to say: all they mean is: *You can’t speak a language unless you can speak the language*.

But if they mean this in sense 1, then they are clearly talking nonsense. Sam certainly speaks the language, but he doesn’t know the grammar in sense 1 at all. He cannot explain the rules. He can’t tell you the difference between a *do*-question and a *wh*-question, and, although he is a very bright six-year-old, he certainly couldn’t tell you what a modal auxiliary is.

You may think at this stage that this is because Sam is a ‘native-speaker’, because he has acquired the language naturally. But I don’t think this is the case. Let us look more closely at the relationship between grammar in sense 1 (grammar1) and grammar in sense 2 (grammar2).

### Slide 3

We use the present simple tense for:

- things that are always true
- things that happen all the time
- things that happen repeatedly

We use the present continuous for

- things that are happening now

This is what learners are often taught. It’s an example of grammar1. Teachers explain and exemplify the rule. Learners are often asked to choose contrastively between one tense and another. They very quickly learn, for example, that in any sentence with the adverb *now* the verb should be present continuous, and that in any sentence with an adverb of frequency such as *usually*, *always* or *sometimes* the verb should be in the present simple.

### Slide 4

If we apply the rules given above then all these sentences are ungrammatical:

1. *Jack is at university. He is studying economics.*
2. *We live in Birmingham now, but our son is living in London.*
3. *I’m playing a lot of tennis these days.*
4. *At eight o’clock I’m usually having my breakfast.*

But almost any competent speaker of English will tell you that they are all grammatically acceptable.

*1 Jack is at university he is studying economics.*

If you were to say this at eleven o'clock at night you would not expect someone to look at their watch and say "My word, Jack must be a very conscientious student if he is studying now – it's eleven o'clock." Perhaps we can amend the 'rule' and say *We use the present continuous for things that are happening now or around now*. So Jack isn't actually studying at this moment, but that's what Jack is normally doing. But then what about this: *Jack is with Unilever. He **works** in their accounts department?* Why isn't *works* in the present continuous since it tells us what Jack is normally doing?

*2 We live in Birmingham now, but our son is living in London.*

This is doubly ungrammatical. We have a *now* with a present simple tense and the present continuous *is living* for something that '*happens all the time*'. How can we account for this? Perhaps it's to do with the nature of the verb *live*. It represents a state rather than an action. That's why it is present simple in *We live in Birmingham now*. But if that is the case why is it continuous in *...our son is living in London?*

*3 I'm playing a lot of tennis these days.*

Isn't that something that happens repeatedly? It's certainly not happening now unless it is said on the tennis court.

*4 At eight o'clock I'm usually having my breakfast.*

This is an unfortunate one because it goes against the rules that all good learners are taught, that we use the present simple with adverbs of frequency. According to the rule it should be present simple because it is something that happens repeatedly – indeed it is quite explicitly something that happens repeatedly. So why is it present continuous? Perhaps it's a very unusual use – the kind of thing we don't hear very often. But I don't think it's unusual at all. And it's certainly grammatical – unless I was ungrammatical a few minutes ago when I said *So Jack isn't actually studying at this moment, but that's what Jack **is normally doing***, using the present continuous with an adverb of frequency.

So it seems there are all kinds of problems with the rules. In fact we often have a choice between the simple and continuous forms. We tend to use the continuous forms

- to show that something happens before and after a given time:

*At eight o'clock I'm usually having my breakfast*

...or before and after another action:

*When I get home the children are normally doing their homework.*

We almost always teach this as a feature of the past continuous, but it's actually a feature of all continuous forms. It's part of the meaning of continuous aspect.

We also use the continuous form:

- to mark something as temporary.

This is perhaps why we can say *Jack is at University. He **is studying** economics and **I'm playing** a lot of tennis these days.*

And finally we use the continuous form:

- to indicate change

This is why we often find the continuous with verbs which indicate change as in:

*Aren't the children growing quickly?  
Your English is really improving*

That may be why *I'm playing a lot of tennis these days* sounds natural – because *these days* implies a change from previous times.

You may say “Oh yes, but that’s much too complicated. Let’s just teach the simple rules so that our students don’t make mistakes.” We will look at this later.

### **Slides 5 and 6**

How many of these sentences are ungrammatical:

1. I looked at the picture.
2. I looked the picture at.
3. I looked at it.
4. I looked it at.
5. I took out my wallet.
6. I took my wallet out.
7. I took it out.
8. I took out it.

That’s easy. Numbers 2, 4 and 8 are clearly ungrammatical. But since 2 seems to be the same in structure as 6 how is it that the first is ungrammatical and the second is acceptable? And what about 3 and 8. They appear to be the same, yet 3 is OK and 8 is ungrammatical. And the same applies to 4 which is ungrammatical and 7, which is fine. What’s going on here?

### **Slide 7**

#### **Two part verbs**

***The children are growing up. (intransitive)***

***You can count on me. (transitive)***

**Many two part verbs have the pattern:**

**N + V + p + N:**

***You can count on me.***

***I knew I could count on my friends.***

Well, it's to do with phrasal verbs. In English we have lots of verbs made up of two parts, some of them intransitive like:

*The children are growing up*

...and some of them transitive like:

*You can count on me.*

There are lots of two part verbs which are transitive and have the pattern:

V + p + N (Verb (*count*) + particle (*on*) + noun (*me*))

as in:

*I knew I would count + on + my friends*

*You can count + on + me*

### Slide 8

**True phrasal verbs are followed by two patterns:**

*He knocked over the vase* → N + V + p + N  
*He knocked the vase over* → N + V + N + p

**If the object is a personal pronoun only the first pattern occurs:**

*He knocked it over*  
 \* *He knocked over it.*

Verbs like *grow up* and *count on* are often called phrasal verbs. But I would like to keep the term *phrasal verbs* for a particular group of very common two part verbs which are followed by two possible patterns:

V + p + N → *He knocked + over + the vase*

and:

V + N + p → *He knocked + the vase + over*

Let me call these '*true phrasal verbs*'.

There is another interesting thing about these true phrasal verbs. If their object is a personal pronoun they are found with the second pattern:

V + N + p → *He knocked + it + over*

but not with the first:

V + p + N → \**He knocked + over + it*

So if we look back at Slide 5 we can explain things by saying that *look at* is a two part verb, but *take out* is a (true) phrasal verb.

But this doesn't really tell us anything very useful. It doesn't tell us how we can recognise what is a two part verb and what is a true phrasal verb.

### Slide 9

**True phrasal verbs have a figurative meaning.  
Compare *run up a bill* and *run up a hill*.**

**But compare also:**

*take in, take out*  
**and**  
*take after, take against*

Sometime people say that true phrasal verbs have a figurative rather than a literal meaning. So *to run up a bill* is a phrasal verb, whereas *to run up a hill* is not. But that's not very helpful. Lots of true phrasal verbs mean more or less literally what they say. If you take something in then *take* means *take* and *in* means *in*. The same applies to *take out*, yet both of these are true phrasal verbs. On the other hand *take after* as in *He takes after his father* is not a true phrasal verb, even though the meaning is clearly figurative: *take* does not mean literally *take* and *after* does not mean *after*. The same applies to *take against* as in *He took against university and gave up after a couple of months*. So that test doesn't work.

So how do we recognise phrasal verbs? And how do learner recognise phrasal verbs and learn to say things like *He took the dog out for a walk* but avoid things like *He found the dog's lead and took out it for a walk*?

### Slide 10

**Some two part verbs consist of an intransitive verb and a preposition:**

*She laughed* → *She laughed at me*  
= *She laughed (at me)*

**True phrasal verbs consist of a transitive verb and an adverb:**  
*He took the washing* → *He took in the washing*  
= *He took in (the washing)* (i.e. *He took it in the house*)

In order to understand the difference you need to know something about transitivity; you need to know that a particle can be either a preposition or an adverb; and you need to know that most words which look like prepositions can also function as adverbs. That's not too difficult. Or is it? Anyway here goes.

Some two part verbs consist of an intransitive verb and a preposition as in *She laughed at me*, where *laughed* is an intransitive verb (it doesn't take an object) which

is followed by a prepositional phrase, *at me*. The personal pronoun *me* is the object of the preposition *at*. The clause breaks down as:

*She (laughed) + (at me)*

True phrasal verbs, however, consist of a transitive verb and an adverb. So when we say something like *He took in the washing* it breaks down as:

*He (took in) + (the washing)*

This becomes clear if we expand the clause and say *He took the washing in the house* where the object of the preposition *in* is clearly *the house*. Now you can't play this trick with a phrasal verb like *knock over* because you can't expand the clause so as to identify an object for the preposition. But it becomes clear that in the clause *He knocked the over the vase* he didn't knock it over anything, he just knocked it over. So *over* has no object, which means it is not functioning as a preposition. It is functioning as an adverb.

So now that you have a grammatical explanation, now that you understand the rules, you are in a position to spot the difference between a two part verb and a true phrasal verb.

### **Slides 11 and 12**

**Which of these are true phrasal verbs?**

**In other words which of them:**

- **allow the pattern V + N + p?**
- **do not allow V + N +p when N is a personal pronoun?**

*fall for; bring up; bump into; knock out; get over; put away*

So which of these are true phrasal verbs? Which ones allow the pattern V + N + p, but do not allow V + p + N when N is a personal pronoun?

*fall for bring up bump into knock out get over put away*

I am sure you were able to identify *bring up*, *knock out* and *put away* as true phrasal verbs. But I am almost sure that you did not do it by applying my complex and abstract grammatical explanation. You did it by saying to yourself: "*He fell the girl next door for*, no that's not right. *He fell for her* is OK, so that's not a true phrasal verb. Now, *She brought the children up* – that's OK. *She brought up them* – no that's not right. So *bring up* is a true phrasal verb. In other words you picked out the phrasal verbs not because you can understand or apply the grammatical rules, but because you speak know English. So...

Slide 13

- You can't speak a language unless you know the grammar.
- ~~You can't use phrasal verbs unless you know their grammar.~~

*You don't know the grammar  
of phrasal verbs unless you  
can use them.*

... when we say *You can't speak a language unless you know the grammar*, this entails, among other things, that *You can't use phrasal verbs unless you know their grammar*. But I have, I hope demonstrated that even though you were not aware of the rules you have been using phrasal verbs with commendable success for many years. And secondly that even when or if you understood a complex grammatical explanation you relied not on that explanation but on your knowledge of the language. In fact, if you have a sound sense of priorities, you have probably forgotten the explanation altogether. So it is certainly not true to say *You can't use phrasal verbs unless you know their grammar*. The truth of the matter is *You don't know the grammar of phrasal verbs unless you can use them*. Grammar consists not in knowing rules but in knowing the language. So...

Slide 14

~~You can't speak a language unless you know the grammar.~~

*You don't know the grammar  
of a language unless you can  
speak it.*



... rather than saying *You can't speak a language unless you know the grammar* we should recognise that *You don't know the grammar of a language unless you can speak it*. Let's go back to the present continuous. If someone really believes that *We use the present continuous for things that are happening now* can they really be said to know the grammar of the language? Surely you can't say that someone knows the grammar of the language unless they recognise that these are all grammatical sentences?

1. *Jack is at university. He is studying economics.*
2. *We live in Birmingham now, but our son is living in London.*
3. *I'm playing a lot of tennis these days.*
4. *At eight o'clock I'm usually having my breakfast.*

### **Slide 15**

So what are the implications of all this for language teachers? Well, it raises a number of interesting questions:

1. How can we justify telling learners things that are simply wrong?
2. What, if any, is the role of formal instruction in grammar?
3. How can we maintain that we are teaching grammar if we teach only the simple things and leave learners to work out the difficult things for themselves?
4. How do learners manage to develop a more complete and sensitive grammar than their teachers are able to explain or demonstrate?

Let's look very briefly at these:

*How can we justify telling learners things that are simply wrong?*

I don't think we can justify this at all. We can perhaps justify telling partial truths to begin with, if we go on later to fill in the gaps. So we might justify saying *We use the present continuous for things that are happening now*, and then going on later to show that continuous aspect covers all the meanings I outlined above. But I don't think there can be any justification for contrastive teaching which suggests to learners that any sentences containing the word *now* must be present continuous, and any sentence containing an adverb of frequency must have a verb in simple aspect. If we do this one of two things will happen:

- Learners will believe what we say and trust what they have practised. This will distort their notion of present continuous and of continuous aspect in general. It may inhibit them from developing a grammar which actually works.

- Learners will take the generalisation/rule with a large pinch of salt. They will be prepared to set it to one side when they have evidence from language in use that it simply doesn't work. They may still believe in the rule in the sense of grammar1, as indeed many teachers do. But they will reject it in terms of grammar2, which is what really counts.

*What, if any, is the role of formal instruction in grammar?*

Formal instruction can, I think, fulfil three functions:

- For some aspects of grammar, particularly those which tell us how the language is structured (see Willis 2003), we can give firm and precise rules. We can, for example, tell learners how questions are formed, or point out that we do not repeat the subject or object when its place has been taken by a relative pronoun:

*This is the man who ~~he~~ lives next door.*

*This is the man who I was talking about ~~him~~.*

We can point out that there are two ways of expressing modality. We can do it with an adverbial (*Perhaps it will rain tomorrow*) or with a modal verb (*It might/could rain tomorrow*). There are all kinds of things one can usefully say about the language.

- We can usefully correct learners occasionally. This serves the function of preventing fossilisation. Learners need to be pushed. They need to be reminded that there is still more to learn.
- We can provide learners with guidelines which will help them interpret the language they are exposed to in a way that helps them develop a true grammar (grammar2). We could, for example, give them a number of sentences with clauses introduced by *to* including examples like:

*The cheapest way is to hire a van.*

*The word 'grammar' seems to be fairly straightforward.*

*Cuba is willing to talk to US.*

*Novelist says girls are ready to have babies by 15.*

*It helps to reinforce classroom practice.*

*Is it a good idea to buy a refurbished mobile phone?*

To see what they can discover about the uses of the infinitive. This will provide them with useful information about the patterns in which *to* occurs – for example the fact that it is associated not only with verbs (*helps, seems*), but also with nouns (*way, idea*) and adjectives (*willing, ready*). Later we might look at clauses with *to* and clauses with *that* and identify the different functions they serve, *to* being mainly to do with actions and *that* with propositions. Activities like this not only provide useful input to the developing grammar, they also encourage good learning habits. They encourage learners to look carefully and critically at language to see what they can learn from it.

*How can we maintain that we are teaching grammar if we teach only the simple things and leave learners to work out the difficult things for themselves?*

This is in fact what generally happens. We tell learners that continuous aspect can be used to show that something happens before and after a given time or action, or to mark something as temporary, or to indicate change. That tells them something useful about the potential of the continuous form, but learners then have to learn for themselves when it is more useful to say:

*I am playing a lot of tennis these days.*

than to say the equally grammatical:

*I play a lot of tennis these days.*

We explain how passives are formed and then make some simple statement like *We use the passive so we can start the sentence with the thing we are talking about* or *We use the passive when we are not interested in the doer of the action*. Then we leave learners to work out for themselves the much more difficult question of how the passive is actually used in real discourse.

The fact of the matter is that we are not really teaching grammar<sup>2</sup> at all. We are teaching grammar<sup>1</sup> and leaving learners to work out for themselves the much more difficult grammar<sup>2</sup>.

*How do learners manage to develop a more complete and sensitive grammar than their teachers are able to explain or demonstrate?*

I wish I knew the answer. They must have the ability to abstract regularities and relations from the data they come across when using language.

Even the very best grammarians freely admit that they cannot offer more than a fragmentary and imprecise description of the language. Michael Halliday, for example, can clearly lay claim to being one of the very best grammarians, yet he insisted on calling his weighty and much respected work *An introduction to functional grammar* for this very reason. He felt that to call it simply *A functional grammar of English* would be close to hubris. Yet good learners manage, given enough time, to develop a pretty complete grammar of the language, certainly one which goes beyond even the best description a grammarian can offer.

Young children do this at an age when abstract concepts like transitivity adverbials and prepositional phrases are far beyond their understanding. Many adults who cannot consciously grasp these concepts nevertheless manage to learn foreign languages. So there is certainly some faculty at work which is not under conscious control.

And finally the most important question:

*How can we best help learners?*

Teaching can help learners in the ways I have described above, but if they are to learn a language, as opposed to learning to apply a few rules of doubtful validity, then there are a few recommendations worth making:

- We need recognise the limitations of what can be achieved by formal instruction. There is no way we can teach a language in its entirety. We will always depend on learners applying their own creativity and initiative. Teachers can blunt this creativity by giving rules which do not work. This is likely to inhibit learners from developing a system that does work and, more important it is likely to encourage dependence on the teacher. Instead of working on language for themselves learners wait to be told how the language works and what they can and cannot do.
- We need to recognise that language is a meaning system not a set of ‘dos and don’ts – a form of polite etiquette. The rules that teachers give are designed not to help learners explore how to use a language to create meanings they are designed to help learners avoid error. But learners, particularly in the early stages will always make all kinds of errors. The only way to avoid error is by restricting language use and by restricting learners willingness to explore language and experiment language. In other words by blunting the very creativity which enables us to learn languages.
- We should offer learners plenty of opportunities to use language both receptively and productively. Learners need exposure to spoken and written language to afford them the data they need to work on in order to build their grammar. They need to produce language in meaningful contexts to enable them to establish and extend their repertoire.
- We should encourage the kind of activity that stimulates learners to think about language, to identify, for example, patterns with *to* in the example given above. By encouraging this kind of language awareness we may help to sharpen learners’ natural learning capacity, their natural tendency to look for patterns and regularities in the language they encounter. If we are to do this then we should, as far as possible, give them real language to work with. The problem with teacher contrived language is that it is all too often designed to illustrate language as the teacher believes it to be rather than as it really is. Teachers generate examples and exercises in which their rules about the present continuous work, because they suppress any language that contradicts their oversimplification.
- We should celebrate achievement rather than penalise error. There is no virtue in avoiding error if, in order to do so learners limit what they have to say to something which is limited and circumscribed. We should be doing everything we can to help learners experiment with language and not inhibiting experiment by stigmatising error.

<http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2010/sessions/2010-04-09/what-do-we-mean-grammar-dave-willis> (Zugriff 23.04.2010)