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# Making Sense:

The Glamorous Story of English Grammar

David Crystal

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# Preface

As with the earlier titles in this series, on spelling (*Spell It Out*) and punctuation (*Making a Point*), my aim in this book is exactly what its title and subtitle suggest: to explain how the subject of grammar has evolved since classical times to reach the position it is in today. All three books – to coin a phrase, S, P a[nd] G – bring to light the complex history of the English language, which is calling out for description at a point when our present-day sensibilities are struggling to grasp the realities of language variation and change, and the implications this has for children’s education.

Grammar presents a special challenge, because – far more than in the case of spelling and punctuation – there is so much abstract terminology to take on board, and the subject is burdened with a centuries-old history of educational practice that many readers will recall as being anything but glamorous. The obvious questions therefore are: Where did it all come from? Why is it needed? What is its value? How can it be taught – and tested? And where on earth could glamour possibly lie?

I address all these questions in this book, while bearing in mind that my readership will range from those who already have considerable expertise to those with little or no grammatical knowledge. The opening chapters have two parts, accordingly: an opening section that is introductory in character; and an explanatory section that explores each issue in



greater depth. Taken together, I hope these will provide a satisfying answer to the question I am most often asked: ‘Why is there such a fuss about grammar?’

I am most grateful to those who read a draft of the book from various points of view: to Professor Richard Hudson, especially for providing me with extra perspective on recent UK trends in language in education; to Hilary Crystal, for advice on my general level and approach to the subject; and to John Davey (who commissioned the work on behalf of Profile Books) for guidance on matters of content and organization.

Chapters on the political background to grammar-teaching in the UK were felt by the publisher to be too parochial for an international readership, so I have made these available on my website as an essay entitled ‘The recent political history of English grammar in the UK’: [www.davidcrystal.com](http://www.davidcrystal.com)

grammar

from Old French *gramaire*,  
which was an adaptation of Latin *grammatica*  
which in turn came from Greek *grammatiki*  
meaning ‘pertaining to letters or literature’  
which later narrowed to mean just the language of texts  
which in the Middle Ages meant chiefly Latin  
and so took on the meaning of ‘special learning, knowledge’  
and then ‘secret knowledge’ as in magic and astrology  
which is how it was first used in Scotland in the 18th century  
when the word was pronounced with an *l* instead of an *r*  
and the meaning developed of ‘enchantment, spell’  
and later became the word we know today, meaning  
‘charm, attractiveness, physical allure’  
spelled

**glamour** (British English)

**glamor** (American English)

# Introduction

## *Not knowing grammar: a student's tale*

I was giving a new intake of undergraduates their first lecture on English grammar. It was the early 1970s – a few years after the formal teaching of grammar had disappeared from the school curriculum in the UK, and I was about to experience one of the consequences.

I'd given this course several times. The main aim of my opening lecture was to make students aware of the contrast between the 'old' ways of learning about grammar they had experienced in school and the new approaches they would encounter at university. To do this, I would take an example of a rule I knew they would all have been taught: 'Never end a sentence with a preposition.' Many older readers will recall having had that rule dinned into them.

I'll explain where the rule came from in Chapter 12. In my class I simply illustrated what the rule did. They would have been told that the first of the following two sentences was 'incorrect', and the second was 'correct':

This is the man I was talking to.

This is the man to whom I was talking.

I would then go on to show how sentences with prepositions at the end have been used in English since Anglo-Saxon times, give some examples from Shakespeare ('To

be or not to be ... and fly to others that I know not of), and point out that today the difference is one of style: the second sentence is much more formal than the first. Both are acceptable in standard English, but the first is more likely to be found in informal speech and the second in formal writing. Today I'd add that you don't see the second one much on Facebook.

Anyway, on that day in the early 1970s, I was halfway through my usual explanation when I noticed that my audience had begun to fidget (more than usual). Some were whispering to each other. I stopped what I was saying and asked: 'Is there a problem?'

One student put her hand up. 'Please,' she said, 'What's a preposition?'

I was, as I used to say in Liverpool, gobsmacked. I had never been asked that question before. It had never occurred to me that someone, now aged 18, could have gone through school without learning what a preposition was. I asked the audience: 'How many of you don't know what a preposition is?' Most put their hands up. I couldn't believe it.

'I think I know,' said another student. 'Thank goodness,' I thought, and asked her to continue. Then she said: 'Is it something to do with getting on a horse?'

There is no single word in Liverpudlian slang for a greater degree of gobsmackedness. I think I croaked, 'How do you mean?'

'Well,' she said, 'I was always told that a pre-position was what one had to adopt when preparing to mount.' She pronounced it 'pree-position'.

It was the first time I realized how great the change had been in schools. Within just a few years – less than a decade – many students were leaving school with no knowledge of grammar at all. It seems that the teaching of grammar just

– stopped. I discovered later that it wasn't just a British thing. A similar disaffection had taken place in other mother-tongue countries where 'English' was a classroom subject. A few schools kept it going, especially in relation to the teaching of Latin or a modern language – which is why some of my class smugly knew what a preposition was – but in relation to English, it was as if grammar had never been.

I'll talk later about why all this happened and what replaced it. But the consequences of this radical change of direction were long-lasting. When grammar began to re-emerge in schools in the 1990s – in Britain, as part of the National Curriculum – there was a widespread uncertainty among teachers about how to handle it, for the obvious reason that these teachers had never had any grammatical training themselves. That uncertainty continues today.

It isn't just teachers. Parents too – those who have never had any grammar training either – are nonplussed when their child now turns to them for homework help and asks 'What's a preposition?' – or an adverb, or a noun phrase, or a subordinate clause ... And indeed, anyone who tries to speak or write clear and effective English can be nonplussed when they try to take on board the misleading advice offered by pedants who reduce grammar to a simple set of rights and wrongs and then insist on everyone else doing the same. Pedants need to make sense of grammar too.

We all do. Even little children.

## *Not knowing grammar: a child's tale*

Suzie, aged eighteen months, came rushing excitedly into the room, clutching her favourite teddy bear, and stood there in front of me. 'Push!' she said, with a big smile on her face. I reflected, then bent down and gave her a gentle shove. She wobbled back a few paces, then looked at me with a big frown. 'No. Push!' she insisted.

I reflected again. I must have got it wrong. She wanted to push *me*. So I crouched down in front of her, opened my arms wide, and said, 'OK. Push me! Push me!' She stood there, even more serious and puzzled. 'No. Push!'

Eventually we worked it out. She took me by the hand, and we went into the next room, where there was a toy swing. She put teddy on the swing, turned to me, and said again, 'Push.' So that was it. It was teddy who needed the action.

I remember stupidly saying to her, at that point, 'So why didn't you say that in the first place?' And if she could have spoken, she would have said to me: 'Because, you prat, I'm only eighteen months old, and I haven't got any grammar yet.'

She might have continued: 'Ask me again in six months time, Daddy, and I'll show you some real grammar.' And that's what happened. At around age two, she was able to say such things as 'You push me', 'Me push you', and 'You push teddy in there.' In just a short time she had mastered the basic rules of word order in English sentences.

And what were these rules doing? They were helping her to make sense – to avoid the ambiguity of her earlier utterances. By 'make' here I mean, literally, 'construct', 'create'. Words by themselves do not make sense. They express a meaning, of course, but it's a vague sort of meaning. Only by putting words into real sentences do we begin to make

sense. We begin to understand each other clearly and precisely, thanks to grammar, because grammar is the study of how sentences work.

That's the chief reason grammar exists: to make sense of words. And this book is about how we do that, the challenges people have faced trying to do that, why the task of speaking and writing in a grammatical way can get us into trouble, and how we can get ourselves out of that trouble. In short: I want to make sense of how we make sense.

E. Nesbit's *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904) opens with the children talking about the quality of their fireworks:

'The ones I got are all right,' Jane said; 'I know they are, because the man at the shop said they were worth thribble the money –'

'I'm sure thribble isn't grammar,' Anthea said.

'Of course it isn't,' said Cyril; 'one word can't be grammar all by itself, so you needn't be so jolly clever.'