

**In 1988, David Crystal produced the first edition of his classic: *Rediscover Grammar*. Now, against a background of renewed interest in language, he has produced a third edition, and a new book, *Making Sense of Grammar*. Here, he explains how the books form the two spans of a new millennium bridge to grammar.**

The first edition of *Rediscover Grammar* was published in 1988, at the end of a twenty-year period during which few schools showed much interest or ability in teaching grammar. The situation was nicely captured in cartoon form by McLachlan in its frontispiece. We see a man begging in the street, holding out his hat for donations. Around his neck there is a card which says: 'Grammar Explained: Thank You'. But the passers-by are ignoring him, and his hat is empty. Few people were seriously interested in grammar then.

Fifteen years on, and my, how times have changed! The study of grammar, in an educational context, seems suddenly to have come of age. From being a topic of marginal interest, beloved by a few, hated by many, and ignored by most, it has moved into the centre of pedagogical attention. The McLachlan beggar, in the frontispiece to *Making Sense of Grammar*, is a happy chappy now. He has queues around him, and his hat is full.

Why the change? The answer lies in developments in thinking about the nature of language which became widely known during the 1990s, and which helped to shape the National Curriculum in English. These enabled people to see that the study of grammar has a point. In a word, it *helps*.

Helps what? To improve a person's language abilities. There are four core linguistic domains which we need to attend to, if children are to reach their full potential as communicating human beings: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And in each of these, grammar has a fundamental role to play.

The key is to appreciate that grammar relates to meaning, and to see *how* it does that. Nobody would ever doubt the importance of meaning in educational practice. Meaning is at the heart of communication. It is why we communicate — in order to understand each other. We need to follow and interpret what other people do when they talk or write, and make ourselves clear and effective when we carry out these tasks ourselves.

It is sometimes thought that meaning is nothing to do with grammar — that meaning is 'just a matter of vocabulary'. When we say we are going to 'look the meaning of a word up in a

dictionary', we give this impression. But it is a misleading impression. A word on its own conveys little meaning, as this little experiment shows.

Write the meaning of the following word on the line below.

**table**

.....

If meaning lives 'in a word', you will be able to do this.

But of course you cannot do this, because you do not know which of the several possible meanings of table I had in mind. Did I mean *table* in the sense of furniture, or publishing, or a meal, or one of its other meanings? You have no way of knowing. 'Give us some context', you would argue, 'and then we will be able to carry out the task'. Quite right. That is a prerequisite. But how am I to give you some context? You could rephrase: 'Put the word into a sentence, and then we will know what you mean'.

Precisely. If I put the word into a sentence, then you will know what I mean. That is the key principle. Only by using words in sentences are we able to 'make sense' of them. That is what sentences are for. They are there, quite literally, to 'make' — create — sense. Without sentences, words are vague, ambiguous things. So:

*I fixed the leg of the table.*

*I found a mistake in row three of the table.*

By putting *table* into a sentence, we relate it to other words, and thus convey a particular meaning.

Grammar is the study of how sentences mean, and how the bits of sentences mean. And that is why it helps. If we want to understand the meaning conveyed by sentences, and to develop our ability to express and respond to this meaning, then the more we know about grammar, the more we will be able to carry out these tasks well.

Grammar is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves. The more we are aware of how it works, the more we can monitor the meaning and effectiveness of the way we and others use language. It can help foster precision, detect ambiguity, and exploit the richness of expression available in English. And it can help everyone — not only teachers of English, but teachers of anything, for all teaching is ultimately a matter of getting to grips with meaning.

You may still love grammar, or hate it, but you can no longer ignore it. And as it is not going to go away, it is well worth while getting to grips with it. The crucial question is: How?

A 2 1 s t c e n  
- t u r y g r a m -  
m a r b r i d g e

How do we get from theory to practice? That is what *Making Sense of Grammar* is all about. How do we get our knowledge of grammar to improve our performance, so that we become better listeners, speakers, readers, and writers? We have to build a bridge, and this means introducing a new dimension to the approach of *Rediscover Grammar*. The bridge needs two spans, and the earlier book built only the first.

## The first span: D for description

### The naming of parts

All scientific investigations begin by noticing something which intrigues us, and which makes us want to talk about it. In the case of grammar, we notice the particular way someone speaks or writes — perhaps because we like the effect of it and want to copy or adapt it in some way, or perhaps we think it is an error and want to avoid it or draw attention to it. Either way, we need to identify what we have noticed, and that means naming it.



This was the primary purpose of the traditional approaches to grammar which dominated schoolrooms from the eighteenth century until the 1960s: to provide us with terms to label things. Once we have such labels as 'sentence', 'word', 'noun', and 'adjective', then we can talk about 'a word at the end of a sentence' or 'an adjective going after the noun'. It is an essential first step. Terminology is intrinsic to grammar, as it is to chemistry, geography, and all other subjects which describe things. And a major aim of *Rediscover Grammar* was to introduce a core set of grammatical terms.

### Analysis

But noticing and naming a feature of grammar is not an isolated exercise. It is not enough to say, 'Banana? Aha, that is a singular noun'. If we are bold enough to identify *banana* as a noun, this

means that we must also have noticed that it is not some other part of speech — a verb, say, or an adjective. To say that it is singular means we must have noticed that it is not plural.

In grammar, one observation is always part of a network of other observations. We learn about concepts in clusters — often clusters of two, such as singular—plural, but also larger clusters, such as subject—verb—object. We begin to understand grammar only when we see how an observation fits into the total scheme of things. When we analyse sentences, we are developing our sense of how the whole grammatical system works.

The second major aim of *Rediscover Grammar* was, accordingly, to introduce a way of analysing English sentences so that all the important patterns could be described. At the end of the book, a survivor would be able to look at (or listen to) a text, identify an interesting feature of grammar, name it, and relate it to other features. 'There are six instances of the passive in the opening paragraph.' 'The writer uses many adjectives, but no adverbs.' This is a descriptive ability, which in an exam might get a few marks — but, these days, not very many. Why not?

Any examiner will tell you. Because the descriptive skill, on its own, is not very informative. In an educational context, it is sometimes called 'feature-spotting'. It is a facility that computers have, and the skill shows a similar mechanical-mindedness in humans. Accurate as such descriptive statements may be, we feel that they are somehow missing the point. They invite the reaction: 'So what?'

What point is being missed? Underneath all such observations lurks the crucial question: Why? Why is the speaker or writer using the passive? Why so many adjectives? We need explanations, and feature-spotting does not explain anything.

## The second span: E for explanation

There are two answers to the 'why' questions, and both are important. One answer explains the usage in terms of the meaning it expresses — a *semantic* explanation. The other explains the usage in terms of the effect it conveys — a *pragmatic* explanation.

### Meaning

The semantic issue is the heart of the matter. Every time we encounter a grammatical feature, we need to ask: what does it mean? Every time we study a grammatical contrast, we need to ask: what meaning difference does the contrast express?

Sometimes the answer will be obvious: *singular* expresses the notion of 'one' and *plural* 'more than one'. Sometimes the answer is more complex: tense forms do more than just 'tell the time'. It is often quite difficult to put the 'meaning' of a grammatical feature into words. But always we must bear meaning in mind. After all, that is why we are speaking or writing in the first place.

### Effect

The second way in which we can explain the use of a grammatical feature is by pointing to the effect it conveys. There are many kinds of effect. Some features convey an informal tone, others a formal tone. Some give an impression of elegant care, others of casual spontaneity. Some elicit a reaction of humour, respect, or admiration. Some establish rapport, antagonize, or persuade.

Often, the effect produced by a grammatical usage is a sense of appropriateness or inappropriateness. All subject areas have

norms of expression, and we need to conform to these norms if we do not want to mislead, irritate, or simply appear inept. Certain grammatical features are associated with scientific English, for example; others with advertising English, or the English of the Internet, or the English of everyday conversation. Always we need to think about the kind of grammar which will suit the circumstances.

The point applies equally to the various domains of the curriculum. These have their norms too, often explicitly recognized by exam boards. There may be recommended ways of writing up a scientific experiment, for instance, or of writing a history essay or providing a commentary on a piece of literature. Some domains allow flexibility in grammatical expression; others are much stricter in maintaining a consistent and conventional style.

It is always a matter of *choice*. Whether in school or society, speech or writing, we have in our heads a wide range of grammatical constructions available for our use, and it is up to us to choose which ones will work best to express what we want to say and to achieve the desired effect.

### An example

Why do we use the *passive* construction — a sentences such as *The cat was chased by the dog* — instead of the active equivalent *The dog chased the cat*? The two sentences mean the same, so why do we have both? Part of the answer lies in the way we can leave out the ‘agent’ part of the passive, and say simply: *The cat was chased*. But why should we ever want to do that?

In fact there are many occasions when we want to say that something happened but without wanting — or being able — to say who caused the action. It’s a very common strategy in newspaper headlines. When we read in a paper: *SOLDIER KILLED IN AMBUSH* the passive states the fact but avoids naming the perpetrator. The corresponding active sentence, ‘X killed the soldier’, can hardly be used if nobody knows who did it. And the young child who says *The window’s been smashed* probably knows who did it, but doesn’t want to say.

There are several situations in which we need to use the passive, and it takes a whole chapter of *Making Sense of Grammar* to go through all of them. But that is what we have to do, if we want to *understand* what grammar is for. And every tiny piece of English grammar, from paragraphing to the definite article, needs the same treatment. It is, of course, what traditional approaches to grammar, back in the 1960s and before, never did at all.

## Introducing DEED

The bridge between the theory and the practice of grammar requires two spans: Description and Explanation. The new edition of *Rediscover Grammar* deals with the descriptive part of the exercise. *Making Sense of Grammar* deals with the explanatory part.

We need both spans to complete our appreciation of English grammar. We regularly cross the bridge in both directions, depending on the linguistic task we perform.

■ **D to E** If we are listening and reading, we begin with Description and proceed to Explanation. We notice how someone else is using a grammatical feature, and want to explain its meaning and effect.

■ **E to D** If we are speaking and writing, we begin with Explanation and proceed to Description. We reflect on the meaning we want to convey or the kind of effect we want to achieve, and then choose the features of grammar which will enable us to communicate our intentions effectively. This two-way approach is reflected in its acronym: DEED.

The DEED palindrome suggests the mutual dependence of the relationship between Explanation and Description. It is very important that we should be able to move easily from one dimension of awareness to the other. That is why I have written the chapters in the two books so that they correspond, topic by topic.

Each chapter of *Making Sense of Grammar* begins with a summary of the essential descriptive point made in its predecessor, so that it is possible to read it as a self-contained exercise. Those who have already read *Rediscover Grammar* can use this summary by way of revision, before proceeding to the semantic and pragmatic perspectives. Those who have not will find in the earlier book a greater depth of descriptive detail, as well as discussions of tricky points of analysis and everyday usage.

## Crossing the bridge

Once both spans of the DEED bridge are in place, then the core information we need to improve our grammatical abilities is available, ready to be put to active use. The final step, of course, is to do just that: to put it to use, and (in the case of teachers) to entice others to put it to use.

The long-term aim must be to get into the habit of crossing the DEED bridge routinely, so that it becomes second nature — a process which operates without our needing to think about it, but which can be brought to the surface when occasion demands. Grammar is a means to an end, and once we have mastered it we can, for most purposes in life, stop consciously reflecting upon it. At that point we have become alert to its expressive potential, capable of capitalizing on its strengths and avoiding its pitfalls.

But to get to that stage, we need to cross the DEED bridge regularly and often. Our crossing has to be a smooth one, so that we do not find ourselves collapsing in the middle under the weight of terminology, or being led to do analyses where we fail to see the point. We have to find the crossing so illuminating and enjoyable that we want to keep making it. This is what best practice in grammar teaching is able to do.

There are as many opportunities here as teachers can create and timetables allow, but we are still at an early stage in the development and dissemination of the appropriate educational techniques. Grammar books need to be followed up by lesson-plans, self-help materials, and other teaching aids. There is still much to be done, by way of selecting and grading topics to meet the needs of students at various ages and levels of ability. We do not always know the best ways of crossing the grammar bridge, from either end. But at least now we have a grammar bridge to cross.

---

David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at Bangor University.

*Rediscover Grammar*, 3rd edn, £10.99; *Making Sense of Grammar*, £12.99; from Longman, freephone 0800 579 579