A defence of grammar

Grammar emerged bruised and battered after the heavy criticisms of the KS2 Spag test last month. Here, David Crystal sets the record straight by explaining that it's not grammar putting young writers in a straitjacket, it's the way that we are forced to teach it

GETTY

In 1988, I wrote a book called *Rediscover Grammar* at the end of a 20-year period during which few schools were doing much grammar teaching. 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 completely empty. Few people were seriously interested in grammar then.

How times have changed. 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 educational attention. We test our Year 6s specifically on their grammar knowledge and, at all phases, Spag has renewed focus.

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 demonstrated that the study of grammar has a point. Essentially, if it's taught well, it helps.

What does grammar help?

It helps to improve a person's language abilities. There are four core linguistic domains 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, it can be shown that grammar has a fundamental role to play.

But only if we take on board that ever-so-critical clause: if it's taught well.

So the question needs to be asked: are we teaching grammar as well as we could be? This prompts a second, connected, question that is very relevant in the wake of Sats and in the build up to GCSEs: is the way we test grammar to the detriment or aid of how we teach it?

Why bother with grammar?

The key to good teaching of grammar is to appreciate that grammar relates to meaning, and to explore exactly how it does that.

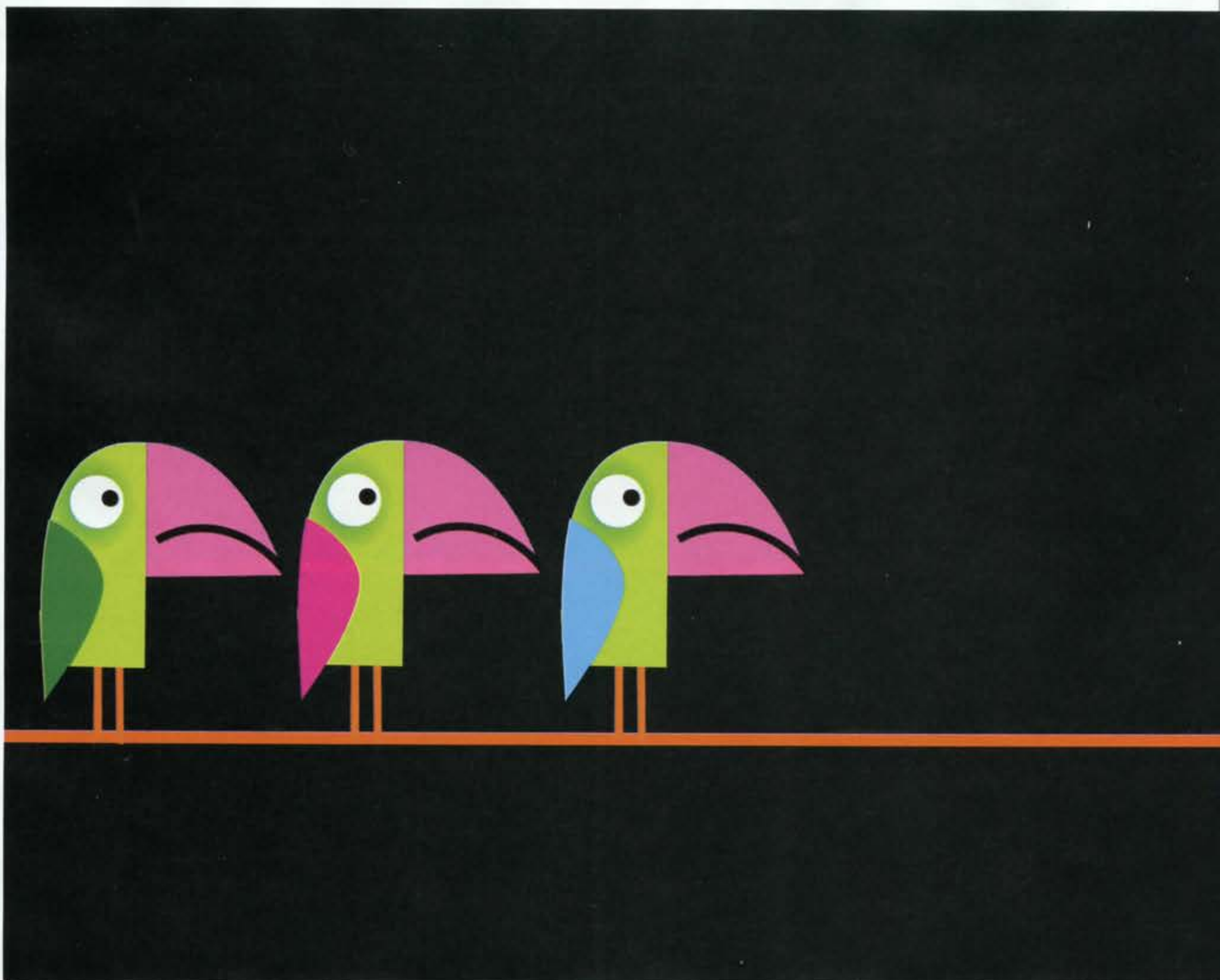
Nobody would ever doubt the importance of meaning in educational practice. Meaning is why we communicate – to understand each other, enjoy each other's company, build social rapport, obtain emotional support. We need to follow and interpret what other people do when they talk or write, and make ourselves clear and effective when we carry out these tasks ourselves.

It's sometimes thought that meaning is nothing to do with grammar, that it is just a matter of vocabulary. When we say we're going to "look the meaning of a word up in a dictionary", we give this impression. But it's a misleading impression. A word on its own conveys little meaning. Take, for example, the following question:

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

jam

....



If meaning lived in a word, you'd be able to do this.

But, of course, you can't do this, because you don't know which of the several possible meanings of jam I had in mind.

Did I mean jam in the sense of a preserve, a crush, a problem, a jazz session...? You have no way of knowing.

"Give us some context," you would argue, "and then we'll be able to carry out the task."

Quite right. But how am I to give you some context?

You could rephrase: "Put the word into a sentence, and then we'll 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, to remove the ambiguity, we need to construct sentences such as "I like jam on bread" and "I got stuck in a 10-mile jam". By giving jam some grammatical context, 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'll be able to carry out these tasks well.

Grammar is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves, so it can help foster precision, detect ambiguity, and exploit the richness of expression available in a language. And it can help everyone – not only teachers of English, but teachers of any subject, for all teaching is ultimately a matter of getting to grips with meaning.

A bridge between theory into practice

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 bridge has two spans.

The first span: D for description

All scientific investigations begin by noticing something that intrigues us, and that makes us want to talk about it. That means naming it. This was the primary purpose of the traditional approaches to grammar that dominated schoolrooms from the 18th century until the 1960s, and that is back with us today: to provide us with terms to name 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 before the noun". It is an essential first step.

However, on its own, this descriptive skill is not very informative. In an educational context, it is sometimes called feature-spotting, as in "There are six instances of the passive in the opening paragraph". It's a facility that computers have, and the skill shows a similar mechanical-mindedness in humans. Accurate though such 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

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the speaker or writer using the passive? We need explanations and context, and feature-spotting doesn't explain anything.

The second span: E for explanation

There are two answers to the why question, and both are equally important.

One answer explains the usage in terms of the meaning it expresses – a semantic explanation. Every time we encounter a grammatical feature, we need to ask: what does it mean?

The other answer explains the usage in terms of the intention behind its use and the effect that it conveys – a pragmatic explanation. This is what makes grammar come alive, because to explore pragmatic effects we have to leave the classroom behind and go searching for grammar in everyday life.

So, why do we use the passive construction (as in "The cat was chased by the dog") instead of the active equivalent ("The dog chased the cat")?

In traditional grammar, the different constructions would simply be named and parsed (subject-verb-agent vs subject-verb-object) and students would practise turning one into the other. Having set those activities, the grammar teacher would think "my work here is done" and go on to another topic.

If that's all there is to grammar, then it deserves its criticisms. But that is not the end of the passive story; in fact, it's barely the beginning.

We need, first, to look at the two sentences semantically. We notice something strange about them straight away: the two sentences have the same meaning. So why do we need 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." We don't have to say who did the chasing.

This leads to the pragmatic question: why should we ever want to say such a thing?

There are many occasions when we want to say that something happened but without wanting – or being able – to say who or what caused the action. It's a very common strategy in headlines. Imagine a newspaper hoarding outside a paper shop: SOLDIER KILLED. The passive states the fact but avoids naming the perpetrator. Why? Perhaps nobody knows who did it. But even if the killer is known, leaving out the name arouses curiosity. You're more likely to go in and buy the paper.

That's what the passive does: it allows you to say that something happened without having to say who did it.

So we find it used in all sorts of circumstances, such as in science, where nobody cares who made two elements combine as long as two elements are combined. And if a teacher takes a class on a passive hunt ("We're going to catch a big one. We're not scared"), it won't be long before interesting examples are seen in everyday life. I've observed such jaunts get very vociferous when the students encounter a passive such as "Entry prohibited". Who has the right to prohibit us? Why don't they identify themselves?

Two spans, not one

So the bridge between grammatical theory and practice requires two spans: description (D) and explanation (E). Teachers should ensure that students routinely 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 that will enable us to communicate our intentions effectively.

This two-way approach is reflected in the acronym I use to summarise this process: Deed.

What should never happen is to stop in the middle of the bridge: to think that description is the whole of the grammatical story. That's the main problem with tests of the Spag kind: they focus only on describing, not

'We risk putting an entire generation off writing'

My academic records show that I got A*s in English literature and English language at GCSE, an A in English at A level and a 2.1 degree in English from Bristol University. I taught English in secondary schools and I am now a children's author with multiple book deals. But despite this, I scored 40 per cent on an English Sats test.

I am not against exams nor am I against working hard. In every school visit, my message is one of resilience, perseverance and grit, both in exams and life. But I am against the pedantic, restrictive and irrelevant testing of children. The Sats papers demand a knowledge of fronted adverbials and subordinating conjunctions, and I feel that with this mechanical approach to learning we risk putting an entire generation of children off writing.

Accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation are important. Precision and confidence in expression empower us. But getting children to parrot back complex grammatical concepts is education at its most futile, and at its most depressing. It is reminiscent of the Gradgrindian education system that Charles Dickens satirises in *Hard Times*.

A system that champions modal verbs over creativity stifles pupils' imagination and individuality.

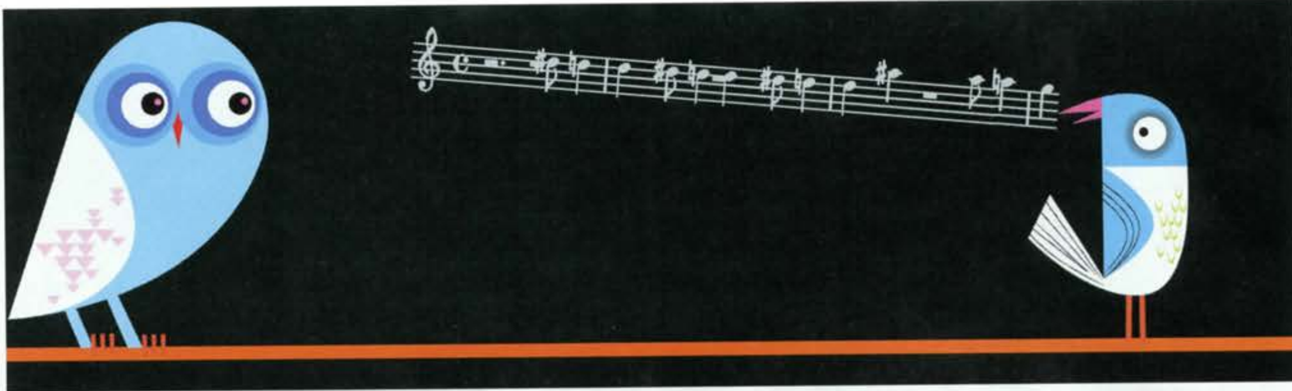
I am not a writer because I knew what fronted adverbials were when I was at school. I am a writer because the wild landscape of my childhood filled me with wonder. I am a writer because learning made me curious and adventurous. I am a writer because books carried me to new worlds and language filled me with delight. I am a writer because I refused to quit when my books were rejected.

Language is fluid and playful (thank you, Roald Dahl for snozzcumbers). I learnt invaluable lessons about empathy, courage and hope from the stories I read as a child. Lyra Belacqua taught me to be brave and Mildred Hubble taught me that you don't need to be the brightest or prettiest girl in the room to be the heroine of a story.

So, kids, your worth is not quantified by your Sats scores. Learn the power of language, but remember that the best writing is original and brave. Like Shakespeare's – another writer who wouldn't have passed that test.

Abi Elphinstone is author of The Dreamsnatcher *and* The Shadow Keeper, *both published by Simon and Schuster Children's UK*

Sats focus only on describing, not on explaining



on explaining. And the temptation, therefore, is for teachers to do the same.

It's the wrong approach. If the teachers were to instead focus as much on explanation in the classroom, any test on just the descriptive part would be simple and would highlight it for the mere feature-spotting it is. I was delighted when I heard that some 10-year-olds had put a previous year's test in its place, after having had a good grounding in the Deed approach from a cadre of Buckinghamshire teachers who had participated in a grammar project.

"Is that all we have to do? Just draw circles round things?" they asked.

It was as if, having been taught to drive and turning up nervously for your driving test, all you are asked to do is tell the difference between the accelerator and the brake pedal. You need to know that, of course; but the potential and enjoyment of driving requires other skills, knowledge, and sensitivities, and these have to be taught, too, otherwise you're not going anywhere.

And here is where grammar comes alive. Here is where we can learn to love it ourselves and ensure that children love it, too. Learning to drive around in language efficiently, enjoyably, and effectively is no different from the example with the car. And what wonderful places we can drive to, when we have some grammatical fuel.

I shall finish with an example. I've lost count of the number of children who tell me "I'd love to write like Terry Pratchett" (or some other favourite author). How can we help them do that?

Joanne, aged 10, had a great idea for a piece of fiction, but every time she tried to tell it on the page, she said that it looked dull.

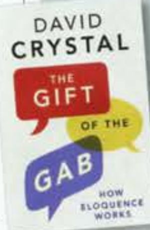
"Why isn't Terry Pratchett dull?" she asked me.

My answer was: "Because of the way he uses grammar."

She looked at me as if I'd said a rude word. So we explored an example or two.

"Tell me where your character lives," I asked her.

How do you create an eloquent person?



It's a question David Crystal explores in his new book, *The Gift of the Gab: How Eloquence Works.* Focussing on everything from the pitch and pace of speaking to the appropriateness of the content, Crystal examines what makes a good speaker and how technologies can both help and hinder an individual's verbal powers.

"In an old ruined house on a hill."

"So begin your story."

And, dutifully, she wrote: "The old, ruined house stood on the hillside."

"You've put the adjectives before the noun," I said. "See what happens if you put them after the noun."

I didn't have to explain what nouns and adjectives were. She'd drawn innumerable circles around them.

And, this time, she wrote: "The house, old, ruined, stood on the hillside."

"Which is better?" I asked her.

"Ooh, the second one. It's creepier," she said.

"That's right," I said. "When you put an adjective after a noun like that, it adds some extra atmosphere or drama to the scene."

"Can we do another one?" she asked.

"Here's one," I said. "Which is more atmospheric:

'He saw the gleam of ten thousand green, red and white eyes.'

'He saw the gleam of ten thousand eyes, green, red and white.'"

"The second again," she said. "It's a lovely sentence."

"It is," I said, "but I didn't write it. You'll find it in chapter 13 of *The Carpet People*. By Terry Pratchett."

David Crystal is a British linguist, academic, author and broadcaster

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