Being pragmatic about grammar

'What's this pragmatics approach to grammar all about, then?' I was asked the other day.' It's the most exciting thing that's ever happened to grammar', I replied. They didn't believe me.

But it's true. The problem with old-style approaches to grammar was that they spent all their time analysing structures without saying why the structures were being used in the first place. You could get 100 per cent in the old exams by answering such questions as: 'Underline all the passive constructions in the following paragraph'. Some people still think like that - that they've 'done grammar' if they are able to label the bits and pieces correctly. But they haven't. At that point the story of grammar is only just beginning.

For the important question is: Why are there passive constructions there in the first place?' Why did the writer choose to use a passive sentence, instead of an active one? After all, an active one is much easier. A pragmatic approach answers this question.

Pragmatics is the study of the choices we make when we use language. It applies to all aspects of language - sounds, vocabulary, grammar... The term shouldn't scare you. It is simply an application of the everyday use of the word 'pragmatic'. If I'm a pragmatic person, I make my judgements about how to behave based on the circumstances in which I find myself (its opposite is 'dogmatic'). In other words, I *choose* how to behave. It's the same with grammar. Pragmatics asks the question: why did you choose to use construction X instead of construction Y? Any bit of grammar can be studied in this way - and the results are always illuminating.

Let's follow up the active/passive example. These terms identify two possible sentence types in a language, illustrated by *The cat chased the mouse* (active) and *The mouse is chased by the cat* (passive). Grammarians called the first type 'active' because the activity is focused at the beginning of the sentence (the cat is actively doing the chasing). They called the second type 'passive' because the beginning of the sentence isn't being active at all - the poor old mouse is minding its own business, and only later in the sentence does it realize that there is a fearsome cat chasing it.

But the two sentences mean the same thing. So the question is: why are there two sentences in a language with no difference of meaning. The answer is that there is a *potential* difference. In the passive sentence, you can leave out the 'who did it' part (technically called the 'agent') and have a sentence like this: *The mouse was chased*. You can't do this with the active one: you can't say *Chased the mouse*.

Now we get to the pragmatics bit. Why would anyone ever want to produce a sentence describing an event, without wanting to say who did it? Why is a passive without an agent useful? This is where grammar gets interesting. I've sent kids off on a passive-hunt, where they go looking for examples of passives without an agent, and then we discuss why they are there. Here are three examples of the sort of thing they find.

There is a crashing noise, and we see a window with a hole in it and a little boy looking guilty. 'What's happened?' we ask. 'The window's broken', he replies - neatly using a passive form, and thus avoiding having to say who did it! Aware teachers and parents of course know this strategy well, so they then ask for an active construction: 'I can see that the window's broken, but who broke it!?'

We are walking down a street and we see a news-vendor headline: '4 killed'. It puzzles us. How? Killed by what? The headline writer has been very clever, using a passive and omitting the agent. If he had told us who or what had done the killing ('4 killed by terrorists') our curiosity is satisfied, and maybe we don't go in to buy the paper.

We read a report of a science experiment, and it says: *The mixture was poured into the test-tube*. Why not: *Fred poured the mixture into the test-tube*? Because the fact that it was Fred who did the pouring is neither here nor there. In science, who did the experiment doesn't matter. It's the fact that the experiment was done which matters. So we need a way of impersonally describing what happened - without having to say who did it. And that is what the passive allows.

These are just three examples. There are several other uses of the passive, and it's fascinating to explore them all. And any construction can be approached from a pragmatic point of view. In a book written in 2004, *Making Sense of Grammar* (Longman), I went through all the constructions in English and looked at them pragmatically. It was the most exciting exercise in 'doing grammar' I've every done. And when I work with students, from this point of view, I find they enjoy it too.